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The Life and Legacy of Marie Couvent: Social Networks, Property Ownership, and the Making of a Free People of Color Community in New Orleans.

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APPROVAL PAGE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation recovers the life of Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent and the Atlantic World she inhabited. Born in Africa around 1757, she was enslaved as a child and shipped to Saint-Domingue through the Bight of Benin in the 1760s. In the tumult of the Haitian Revolution, Couvent fled the island, along with tens of thousands of Saint-Domingue inhabitants. She resettled in New Orleans where she eventually died a free and wealthy slaveholder in 1837. Although illiterate, Couvent left property to establish a free black school in her will. *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* was founded on her land in 1847 and a school operated on the site for over 150 years. This unique example of free black philanthropy in New Orleans demonstrates how the city's free people of color built a community through social ties, property, and collective institutions as the center of slavery shifted to the Deep South.

The dissertation traces both Couvent's geographic movement from the Slave Coast through the French Caribbean to New Orleans and her social mobility from slave to free and from property to property owner. I argue that Couvent utilized social networks and property ownership to rebuild her life in New Orleans and participate in the development of a free people of color community. Couvent formed important social connections at all stages of her life that aided her survival of slavery and her relocation to Louisiana. Reconstructing her social networks in New Orleans reveals a shift from relationships centered on multiracial, Saint-Dominguan ties to a network dominated by free people of color, as Couvent became integrated into the city's existing free black population. One way Couvent formed new relationships was through the acquisition and exchange of property. In addition to gaining economic security, Couvent bolstered her free status, created a family, and assisted in the creation of free black collective institutions through her property ownership. Taking into account her African birth and experience of enslavement in the Saint-Dominguan port city of Cap Français, I analyze the different types of property Couvent owned separately to illustrate how property ownership facilitated as well as complicated the development of a free people of color community in New Orleans.

Her singular bequest and the remarkable endurance of the school have sustained Couvent's legacy in New Orleans as a patron of African American education. A final chapter traces the history of the school(s) and the emphasis its administrators placed on education as a tool to challenge racial prejudice and combat inequality. Couvent remains within New Orleans' public memory, but how she has been remembered varied over the twentieth century. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of the multiple interpretations of Couvent's legacy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began this project as a sophomore at Tulane University for Professor Sylvia Frey's Women's History class. Discovering a microfilm copy of Marie Couvent's will at the New Orleans Public Library put me on this long path to a dissertation project on her life and legacy. I have had much assistance along the way and have long awaited the moment I can express my gratitude for all of the help and support I have received in completing this dissertation.

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To Mama and Daddy
Elizabeth Reins Neidenbach and Michael Eugene Neidenbach (1953-2011)

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INTRODUCTION

"An attempt is made here to gather the sparse records of more than a hundred years and weave them, bit by bit, into a story of Madame Gabriel Bernard Couvent and her environment."

- Marcus B. Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave," *Louisiana Weekly*, 1938

In her last will and testament, recorded on November 12, 1832, Marie Justine Sirnir, Widow Couvent left specific instructions about how her estate should be divided. After three decades in New Orleans this free woman of color had accumulated a sizeable amount of property, including slaves and land. Couvent left various holdings to family and friends, but her greatest bequest extended to her community when she declared that "my land at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union streets will be forever dedicated and employed for the establishment of a free school for the orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny[.]"[1] This last wish came true in 1848 when *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* opened on Couvent's property. A school remained on the lot for over 150 years, and today the site houses the Bishop Perry Community Center. Couvent's philanthropic bequest demonstrates how New Orleans' free people of color built a community through social ties, property, and collective institutions as the center of slavery shifted to the Deep South.

This dissertation recovers the life of Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent and the Atlantic world she inhabited. Born in Africa around 1757, she was enslaved as a child and shipped to the French colony of Saint-Domingue from the Bight of Benin in the early 1760s. Sirnir grew up enslaved in the port city of Cap Français where she had a son and

[1] *Testament de Marie Justine Cirnaire, Veuve Bernard Couvent,* November 12, 1832 in L. T. Caire, Volume 23A, page 186, Act 1048, Notarial Archives Research Center, New Orleans, LA, hereafter, NARC. The Faubourg Marigny is a neighborhood located to the northeast of the French Quarter in New Orleans. All translations of French and Spanish documents are mine unless otherwise noted.

eventually gained her freedom. In the tumult of the Haitian Revolution, she fled the island, along with tens of thousands of Saint-Domingue inhabitants. Sirnir resettled in New Orleans around 1804. She quickly became a property owner, purchasing two pieces of land and buying and selling at least twenty-five slaves over her thirty years in the city. In 1812 she married a formerly enslaved man named Bernard Couvent. Born in New Orleans, Bernard was a carpenter, and until she married him, he was also one of her slaves. Sirnir outlived her husband by eight years. When she died on June 28, 1837, Sirnir, who could not sign her own name, left behind an estate worth $19,145.87.[2] The bulk of that value derived from the piece of land she donated to be used for a school. With her unique bequest and the remarkable endurance of the school on her property, Marie Couvent (as she is most commonly known today) achieved a lasting legacy as a patron of African American education in New Orleans.[3]

Couvent's life was punctuated by movement. This project traces Couvent's geographic movement from the Slave Coast through the French Caribbean to Louisiana as well as her social mobility from slave to free and from property to property owner. I

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[2] The value of Couvent's estate far exceeded the average estate value for free women of color in both 1830($2,818) and 1840 ($3,554). The average estate value for free men of color in these two decades was even lower: $1,496 in 1830 and $2,416. Compared to white men and women, Couvent's estate value was higher than the average for both sexes in 1830 ($11,223 for white men and $7,393 for white women) but lower than the average for both in 1840 ($33,875 for white men and $24,918 for white women). See Virginia Meacham Gould, "Afro-Creole Women, Freedom and Property-Holding in Early New Orleans," in *Coastal Encounters: The Transformation of the Gulf South in the Eighteenth Century*, ed., Richmond Brown (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 165, Table 5. This table was based on Paul Lachance, "The Limits of Privilege: Where Free Persons of Colour Stood in the Hierarchy of Wealth in Antebellum New Orleans," in *Against the Odds: Free Blacks in the Slave Societies of the Americas*, ed., Jane Landers (London: Cass, 1996), 65-84.

[3] I will use both "Sirnir" and "Couvent" to refer to Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent throughout this dissertation. For a discussion of her multiple names see Chapter Two. Throughout the notary records, Couvent can be found under various combinations of names and spellings, including "Ester" and "Marie Justine Esther." After her marriage to Bernard Couvent, records also refer to her as "Marie Couvent," "Marie Bernard Couvent," or "Marie Bernard." Based on how the notary heard it, the surname "Sirnir" is rendered in various ways including Surnaire, Cirnaire, Chirnaire, Sirney, Cirnay, Soiphaire and even Firmin.

argue that Couvent utilized social networks and property ownership to rebuild her life in New Orleans and participate in the development of a Francophone free people of color community there. Couvent formed important social connections at all stages of her life that aided her survival of slavery and her relocation to Louisiana. Reconstructing her social networks in New Orleans reveals a shift from relationships centered on multiracial, Saint-Dominguan ties to a network of predominantly free people of color, as Couvent became integrated into the city's existing free black population. One way she formed new relationships was through the acquisition and exchange of property. Couvent owned two pieces of land and bought and sold at least twenty-five slaves over three decades in the Crescent City. In addition to gaining economic security, Couvent bolstered her free status, created a family, and assisted in the creation of free black collective institutions through her property ownership. Taking into account her African birth and experience of enslavement in Saint-Domingue, I analyze the different types of property Couvent owned separately to illustrate how property ownership facilitated as well as complicated the development of a free people of color community in New Orleans.

Although retained within New Orleans public memory, little scholarly attention has been paid to Couvent. Often brief references to her appear in broader works on the city's free people of color and always in the context of the school created through her bequest.[4] These references derive from two secondary sources: Rodolphe Desdunes' *Nos*

[4] See, for example, Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 201-261; Mary Niall Mitchell, "Raising Freedom's Child: Race, Nation, and the Lives of Black Children in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana" (PhD diss., New York University, 2001); Betty Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical*

Hommes et Notre Histoire and Marcus B. Christian's 1938 editorial, entitled, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave."[5] Published in 1911, Desdunes' homage to the political and cultural achievements of his fellow Creoles of color praises Couvent's philanthropy and describes the founding of *L'Institution Catholique*. Desdunes attended the school in the late 1850s and later served on its Board of Directors. While his book focuses on men, he includes a short chapter on women of which he devotes more than half to Couvent and the Catholic Institution. African American historian and poet Marcus B. Christian provided his biography of Couvent by way of suggestion to name a new public school in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood in her honor. Beyond these two short pieces, there have been no full treatments of Couvent's life.

In discussing the importance of her vision for a school, Desdunes found it "a grave error on the part of her contemporaries to have neglected transmitting to us the precise details in the life story of this generous person."[6] While her peers failed to compose a comprehensive biography of this "black African woman [who] was perhaps a slave in her youth," Couvent left her own paper trail.[7] Various notary ledgers detail exchanges of property by Couvent while sacramental records document her marriage to

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Quarterly, 25 (1942): 728-821; Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); H. E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972).

[5] Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire: Notices biographiques accompagnées de reflexions et de souvenirs personnels* (Montreal, Quebec: Arbour & Dupont, 1911); Marcus B. Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave," *Louisiana Weekly*, February 12, 1938. Desdunes' book was translated into English by Sister Dorothea McCants in 1973. In most cases I have used the original French source so a citation for *Nos Hommes* reflects my translation. When I quote the McCants' version I cite it as *Our Men and Our History*. Christian published his biography on Couvent as an editorial in a black owned and published newspaper in New Orleans.

[6] Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our Men and Our History,* trans. Sister Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 105.

[7] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 139.

Bernard and baptisms in which she served as godmother or as a witness.[8] City directories, maps, and censuses indicate where Couvent lived and her estate inventory provides a glimpse into her household. Couvent did not leave behind diaries or letters, but her participation in commercial transactions and spiritual rituals in New Orleans produced numerous public documents through which her life can be reconstructed.

The most "precise details in the life story" of Marie Couvent are found in her will. Couvent's testament, recorded in 1832, is well-known due to her bequest of land for a school. I discovered, however, that Couvent actually made *two* wills, the first recorded twenty years earlier on October 26, 1812. This previous testament provided significant new details about Couvent, especially in regards to her life before New Orleans. The new information enabled me to trace her connection to other Saint-Domingue refugees back to the island using colonial records housed in the Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence, France. Together, these documents disclose traces of Couvent's experiences of slavery in Saint-Domingue and freedom in Louisiana.

Unlike property transactions, testaments contain personal details about the subject's birthplace, family, and social relationships. Following the standard structure of notarial testaments, each will begins with Couvent's name, age, birthplace, marital status, and names of her children. Formally, these "vital statistics" establish the identity of the testator and delineate any lawful heirs, but for the historian, this information proves critical to recover a past life. More importantly, wills, even when recorded by a notary,

[8] As a French and then Spanish colonial center, New Orleans had a notary system in place when the United States took control of the Louisiana territory in 1803. With the authority to make legally-binding contracts, notaries recorded various types of documents including slave and land transactions, business partnerships, marriage contracts, wills and estate inventories, as well as registrations of previously written documents and declarations of assorted natures. The notarial system in New Orleans remains today, and the city's notary ledgers have been archived together since the late nineteenth century.

are in the testators' own words. Since Couvent could not write, her wills are the closest thing we have to personal papers.

A comparison of the two documents reveals noticeable variations in the personal information included, the people named, and the addition of her philanthropic bequest to the 1832 version. Beyond Couvent's idea for a school, the most striking difference between the 1812 and 1832 documents is the distinct set of individuals she named in the wills. Testaments disclose a network of family members, friends, business associates, and other social relationships forged in the testator's lifetime. Among the most important contacts named in any will are the beneficiaries who receive bequeathed property and executors who manage the testator's estate.[9] Each of Couvent's testaments includes an executor and several beneficiaries, but the choice of individuals changed between the two wills. Some of the adjustments relate to events beyond her control such as the death of an associate. Yet, viewed as a whole, the alterations Couvent made to her choices of legatees and executors indicate changes to her social network that occurred over the twenty years between the two recordings. I argue that such changes point to broader connections Couvent made with free people of color in her neighborhood—connections she recognized through her bequest of land for a school.

Previous scholarship on free people of color in New Orleans indicates that free blacks in the city "composed a fully articulated community."[10] According to Kimberly

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[9] Wheelock Upton and Needler Jennings, *Civil Code of the State of Louisiana with Annotations* (New Orleans: E. Johns and Co., 1838), Book III, Title 1, Chapter 1, page 131, Book III, Title 2, Chapter 6, section 4, Article 5, page 253, hereafter, *Civil Code*.

[10] See Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, "Introduction to Part III" in *Creole New Orleans,* quote on 192; Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Virginia Meacham Gould, " 'In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty:' The Free Women of Color of the Gulf Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, 1769-1860" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1991); Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans;" Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans.*

Hanger, a group identity first emerged among free people of color by the end of the eighteenth century through common cultural and political activities, economic pursuits, and population growth. It did not, however, fully mature until the nineteenth century when free people of color faced increasing discrimination, which, in turn, encouraged them to more clearly identify with one another as a group distinct from that of whites and enslaved blacks.[11] Because Hanger's work centers on the Spanish period, she does not offer much detail on the evolution of a collective identity among free blacks beyond external factors like increased restrictions. Works that do focus on free people of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans tend to presume that a community existed rather than analyze how precisely it developed.[12]

Demographics play an important role in the creation of community, as Hanger shows for the colonial Spanish period. Paul Lachance concurs, arguing that "[f]ree persons of color achieved the numbers necessary to persist as a viable ethnic community in New Orleans in the first decade of the nineteenth century."[13] The arrival of thousands of Saint-Domingue refugees in the early territorial period generated the most significant increase in the city's free black population. In 1805, free people of African descent made up nineteen percent of New Orleans' total population. Following the influx of refugees in 1809-1810, free people of color comprised twenty-nine percent of the population.[14] With the exception of Lachance's work, the impact of the refugees' arrival on the city's existing free black population only recently has begun to be addressed. Prior to this,

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[11] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 163.

[12] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans;" Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty;" Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[13] Paul Lachance, "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans," *Social Science History*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1994), 234.

[14] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 206, Table 1; Lachance, "Formation of a Three-Caste Society," 227, 234.

scholars either failed to mention the refugees or acknowledged their arrival but made no distinction between Saint-Dominguans and New Orleanians, assuming a seamless and immediate integration between the two groups.[15]

Recent scholarship by Nathalie Dessens, Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, Emily Clark, Kenneth Aslakson, and Anne Ulentin has done much to rectify the lack of attention paid to Saint-Dominguans of African descent. Together, these authors demonstrate the social, cultural, economic, and political impact of Saint-Domingue refugees of African descent on New Orleans.[16] A few of these scholars speak specifically to the question of how free black Saint-Dominguans and free black New Orleanians interacted. Nathalie Dessens argues that white and non-white Saint-Domingue refugees existed as a separate group in New Orleans, identifying with one another based on their shared experiences and Saint-Domingue background. This distinction as Saint-

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[15] For work by Paul Lachance on Saint-Domingue refugees see Lachance, "Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Louisiana" in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Geggus (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 209-230; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration and Impact" in *The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees, 1792-1809*, eds. Carl Brasseaux and Glenn Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992), 245-284; Lachance, "Were Saint-Domingue Refugees a Distinctive Cultural Group in Antebellum New Orleans?: Evidence from Patterns and Strategies of Property Holding," *Revista/Review Interamericana*, Vol. 29, nos. 1-4 (1999): 171-192; Lachance, "The Foreign French," in Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans*. For works that mention the influx of refugees but make no distinctions among free people of color see Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Antebellum Louisiana*; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*; Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty." For work that does not mention the refugees see Hirsch and Logsdon, "Introduction to Part III;" Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South.*

[16] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*; Rebecca Scott, " 'She...Refuses to Deliver Up Herself as the Slave of Your Petitioner:' Émigrés, Enslavement, and the 1808 Louisiana Digest of the Civil Laws," *Tulane European and Civil Law Forum*, Vol. 24, (2009): 115-136; Rebecca Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution," *Law and History Review*, November 2011, Vol. 29, no. 4: 1061-1087; Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Kenneth Aslakson, "Making Race: The Role of Free Blacks in the Development of New Orleans' Three-Caste Society, 1791-1812" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2007); Kenneth Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage Myth' of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 45, no. 3 (2012): 709-734; Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Anne Ulentin, "Shades of Grey: Slaveholding Free Women of Color in Antebellum New Orleans, 1800-1840" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2012).

Dominguans remained for several decades following their arrival, but eventually émigrés and especially their descendants integrated into New Orleans' existing social groups.[17] Because her book is focused on the refugees' impact on New Orleans, Dessens does not provide much detail on the interactions among Saint-Dominguans and New Orleanians before this integration took place.

In her book, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*, Emily Clark explicitly challenges the supposition that Saint-Dominguans immediately integrated into New Orleans' existing free black population. Using Catholic marriage records, Clark demonstrates that native New Orleanians did not readily intermarry with refugees and their descendants. She argues that this was a conscious decision on the part of free black New Orleanians to dissociate themselves from Saint-Dominguans of color considered by whites as potentially dangerous revolutionaries and wiley seductresses.[18] Marie Justine Sirnir and Bernard Couvent would be one exception to this trend, as would Couvent's 1832 testamentary executor, New Orleans-born Henry Fletcher, and his wife, Heloise Laville, a native of Cap Français.[19] While Clark's thorough analysis of the sacramental records provides the quantitative data to support her argument, these marriage statistics do not tell the full story. As I will show, notary records indicate interactions and cooperation among Saint-Dominguans and New Orleanians in business, property transactions, and the eventual creation of collective institutions. Kinship ties certainly played an important role

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[17] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 54-55, 63, 65.

[18] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 89.

[19] *Bernardo, negro libre, con Ester negra libre*, October 27, 1812, No. 467, page 45 in *Saint Louis Cathedral: Marriages of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 1: 1777-1830, Part 1: Jan. 1777 to June 1821, Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, hereafter, AANO; *Marriage Contract Henry Fletcher with Heloise Laville*, October 19, 1827, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 21, page 308, NARC.

in the creation of a free black community in New Orleans but other relationships and social connections brought free people of color together across a Saint-Domingue/New Orleans divide.[20]

My project contributes to both the growing body of scholarship on Saint-Domingue refugees in New Orleans and the established historiography of the city's free people of color by examining the role of property ownership in the development of a free black community. The legal right to own property along with access to equal protection of that property under the law was accorded to free people of color in New Orleans in the colonial period and maintained after the Louisiana Purchase. This right delineated a boundary between free and enslaved people of African descent.[21] Thus, for those free blacks who were able to acquire land and/or slaves, owning property served as a clear marker of their free status. The exchange of property in transactions, marriage contracts, and wills brought free people of color together as business partners, neighbors, friends, and family members. While increased discrimination may have been the impetus for free people of color to turn inward and create organizations of their own, the success of this institution-building required established social networks, financial assets, and physical space.[22]

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[20] On free black kinship ties see Hanger, *Bounded Lives,* 89-108.

[21] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 56; Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana*, 170-172, 198-199. Enslaved people of African descent accumulated property, as Dylan Penningroth's work makes clear. Property owned by enslaved people, however, was not legally sanctioned nor protected by the law. Enslaved African Americans rarely owned land (Penningroth provides only one example in his book) and in the antebellum period, at least, they did not own slaves. Examples of slaves owning other slaves can be found in Brazil in the nineteenth century, and Kimberly Hanger found a few instances where this occurred in Spanish New Orleans. See Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 76-77.

[22] In his study of free blacks in Philadelphia, Gary Nash discerned a similar reaction to increased discrimination. He writes, "The reaction of the black community to racial hostility and oppression was not despairing passivity, though disillusionment and a sense of futility must have overcome nearly everyone at many moments... the main response of Philadelphia's black citizens was to continue strengthening

Substantial property holding was a distinguishing feature of New Orleans' free black population. By the antebellum period, the greatest number of free black property owners in the South resided in New Orleans. A tax assessment taken in 1836 lists 855 free people of color who paid taxes on property valued at $2,462, 470.[23] Hanger traces the foundation of this property-holding to the Spanish colonial period. Other scholars who have examined this phenomenon in the nineteenth century include Virginia Gould, Loren Schweninger, Paul Lachance, and Anne Ulentin.[24] While Gould, Hanger, and Ulentin discuss property ownership as one way free people of African descent created a separate identity for themselves, none of these works analyze the connection between property ownership and community development.[25]Moreover, most of this scholarship lumps different kinds of property together or focuses on slave ownership.[26] I argue, however, that owning land and owning people were two very different experiences. I,

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community institutions and thus create an Afro-American society within American society. Consequently, the quarter-century after 1815 became an era of unprecedented institution building that demonstrated the resilience of those regarded increasingly by whites as incapable pariahs. In the formation of churches and benevolent societies and in the education of black children, this was an era of intense creativity and accomplishment. Black Philadelphians could not hold back the storm of racial hatred, but they could try to weather it by strengthening their own neighborhoods and community." See Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 259-260.

[23] Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South,* 71.

[24] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty;" Gould, "Afro-Creole Women;" Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*; Lachance, "The Limits of Privilege;" Lachance, "Were Saint-Domingue Refugees a Distinctive Cultural Group." Other studies include Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana*; Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[25] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 55, 86-87; Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty;" 245, 273; Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 9-10. Ulentin focuses solely on free women of color. Rather, emphasis is either placed on a small group of exceptionally wealthy individuals or on the fact that free black wealth relative to white wealth in the city was "demonstrably less." See Loren Schweninger, "Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Feb., 1990), pp. 31-56; Lachance, "The Limits of Privilege," quote on 79.

[26] While Kimberly Hanger mentions different kinds of property, she focuses mostly on slave ownership. Loren Schweninger treats all types of property together. Anne Ulentin's study is solely on slave ownership among free women of color.

therefore, discuss the relationship between each kind of property and the formation of a free people of color community separately.

Free black slaveholding presents a complex and challenging phenomenon to study. This is, in part, because sources in which free black slave owners discuss their ownership of enslaved people is rare, but also because people of African descent owning other people of African descent does not fit the common narrative of slavery in the United States as a system of white subjugation of black people.[27] Scholars who have studied African American slave owners debate the motivations for holding members of their own race in bondage. In 1924, Carter G. Woodson studied black slave owning through the 1830 Census. Finding that most individuals only owned one or two slaves, Woodson concluded that free people of color mainly held slaves for "philanthropy."[28] In subsequent studies, historians echoed this theory, citing examples of free people of color who purchased their spouses, children, other family members and friends.[29] Larry Koger departed from this line of reasoning in his study of black slaveholders in South Carolina. Although some free people of color owned slaves for benevolent reasons, he argued, it is clear that a good many of them used slaves for commercial purposes, and often the

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[27] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 2. For examples of free black slave owners who left diaries and or other personal records see William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, eds., *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); David Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in the Antebellum South* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1981); Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1984).

[28] Carter G. Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830 Together with Absentee Ownership of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (Westpoint, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1924), v.

[29] For examples of other historians who agree with Carter's conclusion see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 273; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 406; John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1943), 160; Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1942).

situation included a mixture of the two.[30] Since Koger's work, this benevolent/exploitative dichotomy of motives for free black slave owning has remained the predominant way free black slaveholding is discussed.[31]

In her recent dissertation, Anne Ulentin undertook the first comprehensive study of slaveholding among free women of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Ulentin argues that scholarship needs to move beyond the simple divide between free black slave owners as either mostly benevolent or mostly exploitative. Her work indicates that there was much diversity both among free women of color slaveholders as well as their patterns of slave owning in New Orleans.[32] In other words, free people of African descent owned slaves for reasons much more complex than previously supposed. I agree with Ulentin that different questions concerning free black slave owners should be asked. Thus, my project considers how owning people both contributed to and complicated efforts to develop a free black community in New Orleans.

While most works on French-speaking free people of color in New Orleans agree that they developed a community, this scholarship also agrees that New Orleans had a three-tiered racial system, often referred to as a caste system, which considered free people of color as a separate and distinct group from that of whites and slaves. These two concepts—community and racial caste—are interrelated but not necessarily the same. Both were created on some level in response to legal and social restrictions placed on free people of African descent. Community, however, was created among free people of color

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[30] Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790- 1860* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1985), 82. For an earlier work that presented evidence that contradicted Woodson's benevolence thesis see R. Halliburton, Jr., "Free Black Owners of Slaves: A Reappraisal of the Woodson Thesis," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 76 (July 1976): 129-142.

[31] David Lightner and Alexander Ragan, "Were African American Slaveholders Benevolent or Exploitative? A Quantitative Approach," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 71, no. 3 (Aug. 2005): 546.

[32] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 122, 154-155.

by free people of color through shared cultural activities, social and familial networks, and the creation of institutions. Racial caste suggests a more "top-down" construction based on legal definitions and restrictions—laws that restricted marriage by status and race, for example, or legally required racial/status labels for people of African descent in public documents.[33]

Recent work by Kenneth Aslakson seeks to explain the formation of a tri-racial system in New Orleans. In his dissertation, "Making Race: The Role of Free Blacks in the Development of New Orleans' Three-Caste Society, 1791-1812," Aslakson looks to the territorial period to explain the creation New Orleans' racial hierarchy. He argues that free people of color took advantage of the period of transition that followed the Louisiana Purchase to form "a collective identity as a distinct middle caste, contributing to the creation of a tri-racial system."[34] Although the arrival of free people of color from Saint-Domingue at this time served as a key factor in the development of a third "race," Aslakson maintains that native New Orleanians and Saint-Dominguans both contributed to this racial project.

One site in which this occurred was the courtroom. Aslakson analyzes "freedom suits" in which free people of African descent, most of them Saint-Domingue refugees, were claimed as slaves by someone else. He argues that "in emphasizing the *cultural*

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[33] The 1808 Civil Digest made it illegal for free people of color to marry either whites or enslaved people of African descent. Although this law led to increased endogamy among free people of color, some people, like the Couvents, found ways around it. The Louisiana territorial government passed another law in 1808 that required free people of African descent to have the label "free man of color" or "free woman of color" attached to their names in all legal documents. Thus, notary records include the race and status of people of African descent in most cases. Sometimes these labels were specific, such as "free black" or "free mulatto" but often these differentiations were subsumed by the more general "free woman/free man of color." Some records refer to Couvent as a "free black woman," whereas others refer to her as a "free woman of color." For the marriage law see Clark, *American Quadroon*, 87-88. For the racial/status label law see Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana*, 160.

[34] Aslakson, "Making Race," 2.

distinctions between themselves and 'enslaved sons of Africa' these petitioners helped to create a *legal* distinction between 'people of color' and 'negroes.' "[35] The key case in support of this argument is *Adelle v. Beauregard*, in which the court ruled in favor of Adelle Auger, declaring that a person of mixed-race (ie. a person of color) would be presumed free whereas a "Negro" would be presumed a slave. Aslakson concludes that this distinction contributed to "the perception that free blacks were racially distinct from enslaved blacks."[36] I understand him to mean that a complex matrix of racial, status, and cultural markers became construed and then distilled into a third "race" by the white-dominated power structure, and that free people of color actively participated in this process.

It is unclear, however, where someone like Marie Couvent would fit into this process of "making race." As an African-born, former slave, Couvent does not match the profile of a "free woman of color." In popular perception, "free woman of color" denotes the stereotype of the hypersexualized, mixed-race beauty who is often the consort of a white man.[37] In scholarship, an individual labeled as a "free woman of color" (as Couvent often was in notary records) is frequently presumed to be person of mixed race.[38] The conflation of mixed racial ancestry and free people of color is further complicated by the use of the terms "Afro-Creoles" and "Creoles of color." The word "creole" has a complex history in New Orleans, subject to shifting definitions that changed over time and

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[35] Aslakson, "Making Race," 32.

[36] Aslakson, "Making Race," 56-57, quote on 89. Adelle Auger sued for her freedom after her uncle claimed her as his slave. The original case was *Auger v. Beaurocher* but when it was heard on appeal by the Louisiana Supreme Court it was mislabeled as *Adelle v. Beauregard*. See Aslakson, 57, fn 88.

[37] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 96.

[38] Even when diversity within the term "free people of color" is recognized, scholars still define it as referring to people of African and European ancestry. See Kenneth Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2012): 718, 731, n. 29; Ulentin. "Shades of Grey," 2-3, 155.

depended on who used it. It initially referenced a person (or thing) born in New Orleans, as opposed to a resident of African or European birth. "Creole" retained this meaning, even as it came to signify a set of cultural elements, including French language and Catholic religion.[39] Couvent was not a "creole" because she was born in Africa. She was a free woman of color but not of mixed-race. She was a former slave who owned slaves. Yet, she shared cultural traits with someone like Henry Fletcher who was born free in New Orleans to a free black mother and a white father. They were both French-speaking, Catholic, and owned property. More importantly, Couvent and Fletcher had clear ties to one another. Couvent's presence forces us to rethink how the category "free people of color" was made and remade, not only in the courtroom, as Aslakson argues, but within people's daily lives and interactions.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Following the contours of Marie Couvent's life, the first five chapters trace her journey from the Bight of Benin to Saint-Domingue and finally to New Orleans. The sixth chapter examines Couvent's legacy of a free school for orphans of color on her Faubourg Marigny property. The dissertation concludes with an epilogue on the varied and contested ways Couvent has been remembered in New Orleans over the twentieth century.

Arguably the most formative experience of her life, Marie Couvent's enslavement and involuntary migration across the ocean are the subject of Chapter One. This chapter positions her earliest years within the context of the transatlantic slave trade between the

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[39] For more on the history of the term "creole" see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 157-158; Sybil Kein, "Introduction" in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed., Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2000), xiii-xvi; Virginia Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Bight of Benin and Saint-Domingue. Couvent was one of over one million African captives shipped to the French Caribbean colony from the so-called "Slave Coast" during the eighteenth century. On-going political and economic developments on both sides of the Atlantic linked powerful kingdoms, like Dahomey in the Bight of Benin region with profit-seeking French colonists in Saint-Domingue through the slave trade. Unfortunately, few details of Couvent's birth around 1757 and subsequent enslavement are known. Using primary and secondary sources on the Bight of Benin and the slave trade, Chapter One presents a composite portrait of Couvent's forced migration, paying particular attention to the ways her age, sex, and gender shaped her experience. Although she was a young girl, Couvent arrived in Saint-Domingue with knowledge and memories of her earliest years, and these experiences affected the ways in which she understood her enslavement on the island.

Chapter Two turns to Couvent's life in Saint-Domingue, where she grew up in bondage and eventually gained her freedom. Couvent lived in the French colony during the height of its wealth. Landing around 1764, she entered a highly imbalanced and divided society, in which enslaved Africans and their descendants greatly outnumbered the white colonists and free men and women of color. Violence permeated the colony, upholding white domination and the system of slavery that powered the plantation economy. In 1791, a large uprising of enslaved men and women on plantations in the northern plain initiated what became a long, bloody revolution. Couvent survived this conflict, which ultimately destroyed slavery and ended French rule on the island.

As with Chapter One, limited details concerning Couvent's experience as an enslaved person in Saint-Domingue require a general description of slavery in the colony

based on primary and secondary sources. Evidence indicates that Couvent most likely lived in Cap Français, the colony's largest port and cultural center. It remains unclear exactly when or how Couvent gained her freedom, but she was still enslaved when she gave birth to her son, Celestin, around 1782. Given her ability to successfully navigate New Orleans as a free woman and property owner, it seems likely that Couvent experienced freedom in Cap Français, where opportunities for relative mobility and manumission were much greater than in the rural hinterland. Women made up the majority of the bustling port's free black population, where they predominated in the commercial and service sectors and invested in both real estate and slaves. Even if Couvent did not gain her freedom until France abolished slavery in 1794, she would have been exposed to an urban environment with a significant free black female population of property owners and entrepreneurs. The skills and knowledge Couvent accumulated in Cap Français certainly aided her as she rebuilt her life in New Orleans.

Relationships Couvent formed in Saint-Domingue also transferred to Louisiana. Chapter Two introduces the Maurau family, headed by French immigrant brothers, François and Jean Maurau. Couvent's connections with the Mauraus derived from her enslavement. François owned her son, Celestin, and he may have owned Couvent at one point, as well. Although she lost contact with both Celestin and François Maurau in the upheaval caused by the Haitian Revolution, Couvent continued her relationship with Jean Maurau and his wife in New Orleans. In relocating to Louisiana around 1804, Couvent and the Mauraus joined thousands of Saint-Domingue inhabitants who fled the colony both during and immediately after the war. Couvent likely traveled to New Orleans directly from Le Cap, but the specifics of this journey are unknown. In order to

conceptualize Couvent's decision to leave Saint-Domingue and her experience en route to New Orleans, the third chapter uses notary records made by other free women of color refugees to examine their process of migration.

Although these women were a diverse group, they shared similar experiences of loss and dislocation. The notary documents recorded in various refugee locales also illuminate the shared dangers of relocating to places where slavery remained intact. Women of color, particularly formerly enslaved, African-born women like Couvent, risked (re)enslavement upon leaving the island. Free women of color utilized similar strategies to combat such threats and survive the upheaval of flight. Chapter Three argues that free black refugees relied on notary records and social connections to protect their status as free women. Some refugees also used these records to secure their status as property owners. These two concerns often converged because property ownership, particularly claiming ownership of other people as "slaves," bolstered refugee women's own claims to freedom. Social networks, both local and transnational, are clearly visible in these notary documents, as free women of color called upon fellow refugees to verify the truth of their claims and assist them in recovering their property. The connections refugee women created and maintained over the course of their migration aided free women of color considerably as they rebuilt their lives in their new homes.

When Marie Justine Sirnir arrived in New Orleans she would have found many aspects of the city similar to Cap Français. New Orleans contained a sizeable Francophone population, recognizable legal and cultural practices, an expanding institution of slavery, and social and economic ties with the broader Atlantic World. Couvent's continued association with the Maurau family in the city provided her with

support much like that sought by other free women of color refugees. Over time Couvent also formed new relationships in the city with free black New Orleanians. In addition to drawing on Saint-Domingue connections for assistance upon arrival, she purchased property in New Orleans, including land and slaves. Couvent secured her free status, formed a family, and participated in the organization of free black institutions through owning property.

Chapters Four and Five examine Couvent's property ownership and the social networks she formed in New Orleans, as she rebuilt her life there. Together, these chapters argue that property ownership supported the development of a free people of color community in New Orleans. Yet, specific types of property did so in different ways, and thus are best treated separately. Each chapter focuses on one type of property—human and land—in order to demonstrate how owning people and owning real estate and houses played a role in the process of community construction.

Chapter Four analyzes Marie Couvent's slave owning as both an economic strategy and a way to create a system of familial and financial support. Couvent joined numerous other free women of color in the ranks of slaveholder. Indeed, owning, buying, and selling slaves provided free women of color in New Orleans with a viable method of social mobility and wealth accumulation. The twenty-five enslaved men, women, and children Couvent bought and sold over thirty years in New Orleans provided her with capital and labor. Most of these enslaved people served Couvent as strictly financial investments, sources of income, and unpaid toil. With select individuals, however, Couvent created a family. She owned her husband Bernard before they married in 1812. Couvent also manumitted and supported an enslaved woman named Seraphine and

Seraphine's children, all of whom continued to live in the household with her. Couvent's slave ownership, I argue, points to the challenges of creating a free black community amid competing divisions and alliances along racial, status, and kinship lines.

While owning people simultaneously aided and complicated attempts to delineate strict boundaries between people of African descent, land ownership supported the development of a free black community. Free people of color established space for themselves in New Orleans by owning land on which they built homes and businesses. The possession of privately owned land, in turn, allowed them places to create collective institutions. The rapid development of New Orleans during the early nineteenth-century facilitated this strategy. Free people of color took advantage of the city's growth to invest in land, settle new neighborhoods, and physically build the city, as free black carpenters, joiners, and masons. In the process, they built a community. Free people of color in New Orleans came together through kinship ties, business associations, and established institutions like the Catholic Church and the free black militia. These "strategies of association" did not necessarily exclude Saint-Dominguans.[40] By the 1830s and 1840s, when free people of color begin to form their own organizations, memberships in these institutions included people with long roots in New Orleans as well as Saint-Dominguans and their New Orleans-born descendants.

Chapter Five argues that Couvent's last wishes for her Faubourg Marigny property and the school founded there were the result of the relationships she forged with other free people of color in New Orleans. These connections, however, have been obscured over time. According to Rodolphe Desdunes, the free men of color who

[40] Joseph Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Africa and under Slavery in Brazil" in *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery*, eds., José Curto and Paul Lovejoy (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004), 95.

established *L'Institution Catholique* created the school at the behest of a white priest who informed these men about Couvent and her bequest.

This chapter challenges Desdunes' assumption that the free black organizers of the Catholic Institution were unaware of Couvent and her bequest prior to the intervention the priest. Using notary and sacramental records, city directories, censuses, and maps, I trace the social ties that linked Couvent to the free men of color who articulated her vision of a school through her 1832 testamentary executor, Henry Fletcher. Couvent's decision to leave her land to be used for a school for free orphans of color in her neighborhood acknowledged both her ties to a broader free black community and the value of property to supporting that community.

The sixth chapter analyzes Couvent's legacy and its meaning for free people of color and their descendants. Couvent not only bequeathed a piece of land in her will to be used for a school, she also left specific instructions for the institution to be established there. The school was to be tuition-free school and serve free black orphans in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood. Couvent also wanted the school to have connections to the Catholic Church and to exist on her property permanently. Couvent's bold bequest, then, was both a physical space and a vision for her community's future. The realization of that vision occurred in 1847 with the establishment of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents*.

Chapter Six relates the rich history of the school founded in fulfillment of Couvent's bequest and its various iterations over the next century and a half. Although four schools technically have existed on Couvent's Faubourg Marigny property, recognition of Couvent as the original benefactress, among other links, provides

continuity between them. Made at a time when the vast majority of black people in the United States were barred from acquiring a formal education, Couvent's bequest was a political act. The school(s)'s history supports this assessment, demonstrating how education served and continues to serve as a tool to fight against racial discrimination and inequality in New Orleans.

The school's resilience preserved Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent in New Orleans' public memory, but how she has been remembered has varied over time. The epilogue analyzes the ways in which she has been remembered during the twentieth century. In 1911 Rodolphe Desdunes extolled Couvent's generous bequest and discussed the significance of this "very pious" woman's idea for a school.[41] Marcus B. Christian echoed Desdunes' sentiments in his 1938 editorial, declaring Couvent a "worthy Negro" for whom an African American school should be named.[42] Two years later, a brand-new black public school erected a few blocks from the school on Couvent's property bore the name "Marie C. Couvent" in her honor. At the school's opening ceremony held on April 24, 1940, a teacher presented the history of Couvent's bequest, commending her for the foresight to provide an education to generations of black children in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood. A committèe of African Americans chose the name of the new public school, thus claiming ownership of an educational institution and public space as the long Civil Rights Movement gained steam.

In 1994 Couvent's name became a casualty of a campaign led by African Americans to rid the public school system of figures deemed racially oppressive, undertaken as white conservatives sought to dismantle the gains of the Civil Rights

[41] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 139, 142-143.
[42] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave."

Movement. African American activist Carl Galmon headed the campaign, which sought specifically to remove the names of slave owners from New Orleans' public schools. Galmon urged the Marie C. Couvent Elementary School to choose a new moniker not only because its namesake owned slaves but because Couvent was a prostitute and a brothel owner. Specifically, he claimed that Couvent ran a brothel of mixed-race women that was patronized by a white clientele. Galmon offered no proof of Couvent's brothel-owning, and I did not uncover evidence that would support that claim. Rather, the accusation that Couvent capitalized on sexual misdeeds demonstrates how long-standing stereotypes of free women of color in New Orleans continue to be mobilized to further political ends.

CHAPTER ONE
From the Slave Coast to Saint-Domingue

I was born in Guinea[.] [A]t the age of about seven years I was carried to St. Domingue. I am consequently ignorant of the name of my father and of my mother. I am equally ignorant of my age.
- Testament of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow Bernard Couvent
November 12, 1832

On November 12, 1832 Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent recorded her will with notary Louis T. Caire in New Orleans. At the age of seventy-five, the Widow Couvent was sick, and "in the fear of being surprised by death she wanted to put her affairs in order and make an act of her last wishes."[1] Couvent had lived in New Orleans as a free woman and property owner for almost thirty years. Indeed, the act of making a will confirmed her status as both. However, information she provided in this document also indicated that Couvent lived at least part of her life enslaved—in other words, as property.

As was standard in notarial wills, Couvent identified herself by providing her name, "Marie Justine Cirnaire," and her place of birth, "Guinea."[2] When it came to naming her parents, another conventional feature of testaments, Couvent stated that she did not know her mother or father. Nor could she tell the notary her age. Couvent explained her lack of knowledge as the result of being transported to Saint-Domingue when she was a child, "about seven years old."[3] If only provided to satisfy a formal element of this legal document, Couvent's explanation for not knowing her own age and

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[1] *Testament de Marie Justine Cirnaire, Veuve Bernard Couvent*, November 12, 1832 in L. T. Caire, Volume 23A, page 186, Act 1048, Notarial Archives Research Center, New Orleans, LA, hereafter, NARC and *Testament*, 1832.
[2] *Testament*, 1832.
[3] *Testament*, 1832.

family background poignantly encapsulated a common experience shared by millions of Africans who were enslaved, sold, and shipped to the Americas between 1501 and 1866.

A previous will recorded twenty years earlier, however, suggests that some of Couvent's "ignorance" on that November day in 1832 may have stemmed from her advanced age as well as the illness that compelled her to record a testament. On October 26, 1812, "Marie Justine Sirnir *dite* Esther" dictated her first testament to New Orleans notary, Narcisse Broutin. In this document, Couvent provided a more precise account of her age and nativity. She declared, "I am aged about fifty-five years and of the Arada nation."[4] Her estimated age in 1812 corresponds with the age of "about eighty" recorded on Couvent's death certificate in 1837, suggesting a birth year of 1757 and shipment to Saint Domingue around 1764.[5] Further, her identification as "Arada" narrows the geographic possibilities for her birthplace. The term "Guinea," with which Couvent described herself in the 1832 will, makes clear she was born in Africa. Beyond that, Guinea is limited in its usefulness because it was often employed as a generic term for the continent's entire western coast.[6] The self-supplied label "Arada," however, indicates that Couvent lived in the Gbe-speaking coastal region along the Bight of Benin or its

[4] *Testament de Marie Justine Sirnir*, October 26, 1812 in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 27, page 199, NARC, hereafter, *Testament*, 1812.

[5] *Death Certificate of Justine Firmin*, June 29, 1837 in Succession Records of New Orleans Probate Court, 1824-1842, microfilm, New Orleans Public Library, hereafter NOPL.

[6] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 80-81. Hall explains that the term was used initially by European slave traders, especially the Spanish and Portuguese, to mean Greater Senegambia (Senegal/Sierra Leone). By the mid-seventeenth century, the term was "gradually extended to mean the entire West African coast from Senegal down through Angola. But the meaning of 'Guinea' continued to depend on time and place and was far from precise or universal."

immediate hinterland and was shipped from a port located on what European traders called the Slave Coast.[7] (Fig. 1)

Admittedly, the descriptor "Arada nation" limits the scope for analysis of Couvent's African background only to the regional level. "Arada" was a common rendering of "Allada," the name of "the most powerful of the Slave Coast states in the mid-seventeenth century."[8] Many slaves who embarked from trading outlets along the Bight of Benin such as Ouidah were dubbed "Arada" or "Ardra" by European slave traders, regardless of their origin.[9] The blanket term extended to Saint-Domingue, where the majority of enslaved individuals brought to the island in the early eighteenth century arrived from the Bight of Benin region.[10] In the Francophone Atlantic, then, "Arada" often served as a general term to describe those slaves exported from the Bight of Benin, an area that stretched approximately 200 miles between the Volta River in the west and Lagos in the east and contained numerous distinct groups of people and polities.[11]

Nevertheless, knowing even the approximate time and geographic parameters of Marie Couvent's early life allow me to examine the "historically contingent reasons why

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[7] Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1991), 13-14, 21-22; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 111.

[8] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 22, quote on 229, 260; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 112.

[9] Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 17, 111-112; Law, *The Slave Coast,* 22; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 40. Audra Diptee cites a French trader who claimed that the ethnicity assigned to captives often came from the people who sold them or whose territory the captives were brought through to get to the coast. Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica: The Making of an Atlantic Slave Society, 1775-1807* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 65.

[10] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World, 40*; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 17, 111.

[11] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 13-14. In Brazil, for example, the general term for enslaved people shipped from the Bight of Benin/Slave Coast was "Mina." To examine the meaning of "Mina" for Africans in early eighteenth-century Brazil, James Sweet provides the example of an enslaved woman named Thereza Allada who testified that she and another slave, Domingos Álvares, " 'supposedly were both from the same Mina Coast; however, she is from the Arda nation and he is from Cobû, which are different lands." See Sweet, "Mistaken Identities? Olaudah Equiano, Domingos Álvares, and the Methodological Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora," *American Historical Review* (2009) 114(2): 289. For a further discussion of the designation "Mina" in the context of both Brazil and the broader transatlantic slave trade see Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 112-125, especially pages 114, 122-123.

[she was] caught up in enslavement."[12] Time and place are critical to contextualizing her individual experience, but the fact that Couvent was exported as a young girl also played a role in her enslavement. The ways in which gender was structured in the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery in both Africa and the Caribbean shaped her life in meaningful ways. Paying attention to the specific circumstances of Couvent's experience of enslavement is necessary to reconstruct her life.

This chapter traces Couvent's earliest years from the Slave Coast through the Middle Passage to Saint-Domingue. Although specific information about her time in Africa and her enslavement are lacking, many sources help to create a depiction of what Couvent likely experienced as a child captive. I rely on the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, narratives by slave traders and other European observers as well as those recorded by formerly enslaved Africans, and secondary sources on the Bight of Benin region and the slave trade to Saint-Domingue Together, these sources place Couvent's involuntary migration to the French Caribbean in a broader context that underscores the interconnections among these Atlantic spaces and the political, social, and economic forces that made her physical movement possible. Despite her young age, the little girl who became the woman known as Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent brought memories, knowledge, and experiences with her that affected her reaction and adjustment to life in the colony.[13] By exploring some of these experiences, this chapter provides a perspective

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[12] Quoted in Douglas Chambers, "The Black Atlantic: Theory, Method, and Practice" in *The Atlantic World, 1450-2000*, eds. Toyin Falola and Kevin Roberts (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 159.

[13] Paul Lovejoy and David Trotman, "Enslaved Africans and their Expectations of Slave Life in the Americas: Towards a Reconsideration of Models of 'Creolisation,' " in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, eds., Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 67, 70-71.

from which to view her later life as a slave in Saint-Domingue and a free woman in New Orleans.

Creating the Slave Coast

The transatlantic slave trade spanned three and a half centuries and involved the forcible sale and shipment of approximately twelve million men, women, and children from West and Central Africa to North and South America and the Caribbean.[14] The trade, whose purpose was to provide a labor force to work in mines and on plantations, was a central component of the colonial system. The insatiable European demand for New World products including tobacco, indigo, rice, and above all, sugar fueled the incredible growth of the slave trade. Although European colonists initially utilized indigenous people in Brazil and the Caribbean as their main labor source, disease quickly devastated these native populations. This loss of the labor supply led to a reliance on imported African slaves, the transport of which ultimately "resulted in the largest forced migration of humans in history."[15]

By the time the individual who became Marie Couvent was born in the late 1750s, the transatlantic slave trade had been fully established along the Bight of Benin coast for a century.[16] The Portuguese first traded there as early as the 1550s, but the export of

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[14] The most complete figures of the slave trade to date are found in *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, which estimates that between 1501 and 1866, over 12.5 million Africans were forcibly transported to the New World as slaves. Only about 10 million of those Africans sold and embarked at the West and West Central African coasts survived the Middle Passage. The database contends that the voyages included in it represent four-fifths of the total slaves transported. See David Eltis, et al., *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, accessed November 5, 2012, http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast /index.faces and http://www.slavevoyages.org /tast/assessment/estimates.faces, hereafter, TSTD.

[15] Timothy Grady, "Contact and Conquest in Africa and the Americas" in *The Atlantic World, 1450-2000*, 45, quote on 47.

[16] The Portuguese had established trade in the area in the mid-sixteenth century, and were joined by the Dutch in the 1630s, the British in the 1640s, and finally the French in the 1670s. See Law *The Slave Coast,*

slaves did not really start to flourish in the region until the 1660s. Around the same time, 5,000 miles across the Atlantic, the French were just beginning to make inroads on the western portion of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, which eventually would become the colony of Saint-Domingue.[17] Political and economic developments on both sides of the ocean connected these two places through the slave trade, propelling men, women, and children, like Marie Couvent, across the Atlantic Ocean to labor in American colonies. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue was second only to Brazil in the number of slaves received from the Bight of Benin.[18]

Beginning in the late seventeenth century European traders designated the area of the West African coast along the Bight of Benin as "the Slave Coast." Referring to the region's predominant export, this moniker differentiated it from neighboring coasts, such as the "Gold Coast" to the west and the area along the Bight of Biafra to the east.[19] The Bight of Benin coastal region and its immediate hinterland consisted of numerous politically distinct groups that nevertheless shared a common cultural core.[20] The various groups that settled the area spoke languages that were related to one another, now known

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118-121, 124-127; Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port', 1727-1892*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 29.

[17] Law, *The Slave Coast,* 159. Philip Boucher, *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 40, 240; Stephan Palmié and Francisco Scarano, eds., *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and its Peoples* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 220.

[18] Law, *Ouidah,* 126. Between 1700 and 1800, Saint-Domingue received 188,182 slaves from the Bight of Benin, which was a distant second to Brazil. Bahia alone received 518,580 and the total for the whole colony reached 591,149 over the course of the eighteenth century. Jamaica ranked third, again by a large margin, with a total of 72,888 enslaved individuals from the Slave Coast. See TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1800 &mjbyptimp =60500.

[19] Law, *The Slave Coast,* 13-14.

[20] Law, *The Slave Coast,* 14, 21, 26, 105; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 14. Sweet describes the region as simultaneously "culturally similar and politically heterogeneous prior to the arrival of Europeans."

collectively as Gbe languages.[21] The region also held shared religious beliefs based on vodun, a polytheistic system that utilized divination and possession, dance and music, and similar kinds of material culture in its spiritual rituals.[22] These common elements resulted from a succession of migrations initiated in the first millennium that allowed for cultural exchange among groups within the region, as they settled toward the coast. This movement produced an overall "shared sense of lineage and history" but not necessarily "a sense of common identity."[23] The cultural mixture among Gbe-speaking groups was further influenced by neighboring peoples from the Gold Coast to the west and Yoruba-speaking groups in the north and east.[24]

The topography of the area facilitated inter- and intra-regional interaction. Much of the Slave Coast falls within a break in the rain forest that covers the western coast of Africa. Known as the "Benin Gap," this grassy plain extends all the way to the ocean, making contact and trade between the coast and hinterland easier than in the dense forest. About fifty miles inland, however, a marshy expanse called the Ko often disrupted lines of trade and communication, especially during the rainy season.[25] In addition to the Gap, a lagoon system runs east to west along the coast, linking communities and enabling the movement of goods by watercraft between the Volta and Lagos.[26] These geographical

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[21] "Gbe" means "language" and has replaced the term "Ewe-Aja" for the linguistically related languages spoken in the Bight of Benin region. See Law, *The Slave Coast*, 21-22; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 14; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities*, 107, 111.

[22] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 14, 17; Jacques Kerchache, "Le Vaudou du Bénin/ Vodun from Benin" in *Vodun: Africa Voodoo*, eds. Yuji Ono and Adeline Pelletier (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2011), 19, 21-22.

[23] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares* 14, first quote; Law, *The Slave Coast*, second quote on 23, 26.

[24] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 23-26; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares* 14.

[25] Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 43; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 19. The Ko is also called the "Lama," which comes from the Portuguese word for "mud." See Law, 19. Bay refers to the "Benin Gap" as the "Dahomey Gap."

[26] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 20-21.

features supported social, cultural, and economic exchange among varied political and ethnic groups throughout the region.

Accessible trade routes that allowed for the transport of slaves, cloth, and foodstuffs both from the interior to the coast and laterally along the shoreline encouraged the establishment of European trading posts.[27] The earliest Europeans to conduct trade in the area were the Portuguese, who arrived in the mid-sixteenth century. By the 1670s, the Dutch, British, and French had also established commercial relationships in the region.[28] From the beginning, slaves were the primary commodity sought by European traders on the Bight of Benin coast.[29] The trade was concentrated in coastal towns controlled by Allada, the dominant Slave Coast state in the seventeenth century. Allada essentially served in a middleman position, purchasing enslaved individuals brought through interior trade routes and then selling them to Europeans on the coast. Dahomey, a kingdom located north across the Ko, provided a significant number of slaves to Allada by the early eighteenth century. Yoruba-speaking groups, particularly the powerful Oyo state, also supplied Allada with captives.[30]

As it did throughout the continent, the institution of slavery existed in societies in the Bight of Benin area before the arrival of Europeans seeking to trade.[31] Although the meaning of slavery and the structure of the institution developed differently in the Americas, the concept of acquiring individuals through the exchange of goods or money was not alien to Africans. African merchants and political leaders allowed European

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[27] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 19.

[28] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 159; Law, *Ouidah*, 29, 119. The Dutch arrived in the 1630s, followed by the British in 1640s and the French in the 1670s.

[29] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 156, 192-198. Other items, notably food and cloth were acquired as well.

[30] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 185,186-187; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.

[31] Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 94, 97; Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, Second Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7-8, 122; Law, *The Slave Trade*, 66.

traders to participate in the widespread domestic slave market, and the transatlantic export of slaves provided an additional outlet for an already present supply of captives.[32] While individuals ended up in the trade for a variety of reasons, enslaving and selling prisoners taken in wars produced a substantial portion of the slaves supplied to the transatlantic trade.[33]

This was the indeed the case along the Slave Coast. As trade with Europeans increased in the Bight of Benin region, so did conflicts among its various political entities. Access to and control of the trade pitted groups near the coast against one another, and military campaigns deployed for this control only produced more slaves for the transatlantic trade.[34] Allada, in particular, faced challenges to its dominant position. Additionally, expansion by outside kingdoms during the latter half of the seventeenth century, including Oyo in the northeast, Benin to the far east, and the Akwamu from the western Gold Coast periodically threatened the control of territory.[35] These outside groups complicated the internal situation when Allada's rivals formed alliances with Oyo against the ruling kingdom. To counter these threats, Allada turned to hiring mercenary forces from the Gold Coast and its opponents followed suit. This military strategy, which

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[32] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade,* 105, 107, 108-109; Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 74, 94-95, 98, 108.

[33] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 118-119; Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 99; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 20-22.

[34] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 225-226. Scholars have debated the extent to which European demand for slaves and the presence of European traders instigated war between African countries to produce slaves for the trade. A number of scholars agree that conflicts among groups stemmed from internal circumstances that had little to do with the presence of Europeans on the coast. As John Thornton points out, correlation between conflict and the transatlantic trade does not equal causation. In the case of the Slave Coast, however, it is clear that gaining control over the trade with Europeans played a major role in the conflicts between Allada, Hueda, Dahomey, and Oyo. See Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 119; Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 120-125; and Law, *The Slave Coast*, 225.

[35] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 226, 235-237.

clearly favored states with the means to pay soldiers, demonstrates how wealth resulting from the slave trade affected the political landscape of the Slave Coast. [36]

In the 1670s, Allada faced direct challenges to its dominant position in the region in the form of economic competition from the neighboring Hueda kingdom and insubordination from its subjects in Offra, the trading center utilized by Allada.[37] When disagreements between Offra authorities and the Allada king disrupted trade in Offra, the French moved their operations to Ouidah, the coastal village that Hueda used as its trading base.[38] The British followed soon after, and even Allada briefly rerouted its slave supply through Ouidah to punish Offra's disobedience. However, Offra continued to rebel against Allada, and Hueda attempted to take advantage of these internal conflicts by providing military support to Offra against Allada. War broke out in 1692 which resulted in the destruction of Offra. Allada reestablished its base at nearby Jakin and continued to struggle over control of the trade with Hueda through the early years of the eighteenth century. By 1715 Allada had regained a more central place in the trade, but this resurgence was short-lived, as both Allada and Hueda were conquered by Dahomey in the 1720s.[39]

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[36] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 228-229, 237.

[37] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 130, 225, 238-242. Because the capital of Allada was located about twenty-five miles inland, the king sold his slaves to European traders in Offra, a town on the coast.

[38] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 127-130, 238. Hueda was a kingdom established east of Popo and southwest of Allada. Its capital was located at the inland city of Savi. Hueda ruled over the coastal village of Ouidah, whose indigenous name is Glehue. This town served as Hueda's trading center and continued as such under Dahomian rule, as well. Hueda was a dependency of Allada at some point but apparently gained its independence by the mid-seventeenth century. English-language documents from the slave trade often render both Ouidah and Heuda as "Whydah." I follow Robin Law in distinguishing between state and town through these spellings. See Law, *Ouidah*, 17.

[39] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 238-242, 245-247, 252-260; Law, *Ouidah*, 46. It was against the Hueda and people in Offra that Allada employed hired troops. These forces were led by Ofori, the displaced king of Accra, a Gold Coast kingdom conquered by the Akwamu. Accra refugees followed Ofori to resettle east of the Volta in Little Popo. See Law, *The Slave Coast*, 16, 225, 231, 244,

Over the first three decades of the eighteenth century, the kingdom of Dahomey supplanted Allada as the most powerful state on the Slave Coast.[40] Like Hueda, Dahomey was once a tributary of Allada but rebelled against this subordinate position in the late seventeenth century.[41] The kingdom was located directly north of Allada with its capital of Abomey situated about eighty miles from the coast.[42] Between the 1680s and the 1720s, Dahomey built up a large armed force, as a chief supplier of slaves to intermediaries like Allada and Hueda. Not only did participation in the trade grant Dahomey access to European firearms, it also required an efficient and skilled military operation to perform "the actual process of violent enslavement."[43] Dahomey first conquered neighboring Weme around 1716, but its expansion ceased momentarily with the death of the Dahomian king. Under the subsequent leadership of King Agaja, Dahomey went on to conquer Allada in 1724, Hueda in 1727, and destroyed the port town of Jakin in 1732.[44]

Dahomey's expansion carried immediate consequences for the Slave Coast region. The overthrow of Allada and Hueda not only doubled Dahomey's territory but also gave it direct access to European traders through control of the two most important ports, Ouidah and Jakin.[45] These successful military campaigns came at the cost of much

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[40] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 17.
[41] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 262-263, 266.
[42] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 17, 185, 260.
[43] Law, *Ouidah*, quote on 49; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 270-271.
[44] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 265-267, 279, 282, 296-297; Law, *Ouidah*, 50.
[45] Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 56; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 300; Law, *Ouidah*, 50; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 12-13. Dahomey's motivation to undertake these conquests has been debated in the scholarship. Most eighteenth-century European accounts state the belief that access and control of the slave trade was the key factor. Historian Edna Bay points out that Dahomey oral traditions do not provide a reason beyond the mandate that each king was "to make Dahomey always larger." Scholar Ade Akinjogbin, following one eighteenth-century European observer, has argued that King Agaja overthrew Allada and Hueda to stop the slave trade. Bay, Robin Law, and other scholars disagree with this assessment, however, arguing instead that the available evidence does not indicate Dahomian opposition to the trade. Although Dahomey clearly participated in and continued the trade, the state did draw the line at selling its own people to transatlantic

death and destruction to the coastal area. William Snelgrave, an English slave trader who arrived at Ouidah soon after Dahomey captured it, described the scene: "...the desolation of so fine a Country, lately exceeding populous, now destroyed in such a manner by Fire and Sword. The Carnage of the Inhabitants was, above all, a most moving Spectacle, the Fields being strewed with their Bones."[46] When Dahomian soldiers attacked Hueda settlements, including the capital city of Savi, an estimated 5,000 people were killed and another 10,000-11,000 captives were taken. The fates of these prisoners ranged from being beheaded, sacrificed, or sold into slavery.[47]

Snelgrave and other traders that arrived in the immediate aftermath of the Dahomian conquests of Allada and Hueda benefited from the warfare. A fellow ship captain who landed at Ouidah while Snelgrave traded at Jakin wondered which place offered the better "cargo." According to Snelgrave, his colleague made the right choice to stay in Ouidah to trade "...for that People being in a starving Condition, and obliged to sell their Servants and Children for Money and Goods, to buy Food from the Neighbours of *Popoe;* his ship was soon filled with *Negroes,* and he had the good fortune to sail from the Coast three days before me."[48] Despite the desolate scene Snelgrave described previously, or indeed, because of it, thousands of individuals caught in Dahomey's aggressive expansionist efforts ended up in the transatlantic slave trade.

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traders, even those born as slaves within the kingdom. With this in mind, Bay suggests an explanation for Dahomey's actions: "In the political atmosphere of the early eighteenth century, with tiny states warring and selling captives, and where the choice was trading or being traded, military expansion and conquest would have allowed Dahomey to attack and stop potential raiders of its population and, by selling captives, to acquire the means to strengthen its state further." See Bay, *Wives of the Leopard,* 57 for quotes; Law, *The Slave Coast,* 278. Law discusses this debate in *The Slave Coast,* 300-308. For Akinjogbin's view see I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours, 1708-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 73-81. See also Law, *Ouidah,* 50.

[46] William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London: P. Knapton, 1734), Making of the Modern World (U3600699565), 19.

[47] Law, *The Slave Coast,* 285-286; Law, *Ouidah,* 50; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares,* 11-12.

[48] Snelgrave, *A New Account,* 70, image 109.

After negotiating customs fees with King Agaja, Snelgrave eventually loaded his own ship with 600 enslaved men, women, and children to be sold in Antigua.[49]

The violent upheaval in the coastal area resulted in demographic shifts and the creation of new political alliances. Although spared from death or enslavement, survivors of the Dahomian campaigns experienced displacement, famine, and loss. Forced to flee their homes, various groups of remaining Hueda, Allada, and Weme resettled in neighboring territories. The Hueda king, Hufon, led his people west towards Grand Popo where they settled in a place called Geze. Both Weme and Allada royals reconstituted their kingdoms in the east, outside of the reach of Dahomey's power. Allada refugees established the town of Porto-Novo where they were eventually joined by Hueda migrants as well.[50] Historian Robin Law claims that the initial immigration of dispersed Gbe-speakers into the mostly Yoruba eastern part of the Slave Coast "produced considerable disorder" but that "[t]he eventual consequence was the emergence of a group of small independent states which, although divided among themselves, were loosely associated in common hostility to Dahomey."[51] Further north, above Abomey, an alliance of numerous small groups, termed collectively "Mahi," banded together in opposition to Dahomey's arrogation of power. Although individuals retained identities based on family, village, or ethnic community, shared experiences of violence and dislocation brought these disparate groups of people together in novel ways.[52]

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[49] Snelgrave, *A New Account,* 62-64, 73, 109-110.

[50] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 286, 311-313; Law, *Ouidah*, 52.

[51] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 309-310.

[52] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 13-14, on the creation of Mahi see pages 15-16. Sweet is quick to point out that a Mahi identity did not replace previous identities. He writes, "The formation of a broad Mahi identity, in common cause against Dahomey, should not distract attention from real and meaningful differences that continued to define peoples...Mahi simply became a broad 'meta-ethnic' expression of many smaller units of identity, including Savalus, Iannos, and Agonlis."

In spite of his quick and successful overthrow of Hueda and Allada, King Agaja struggled to consolidate Dahomey's control over the region.[53] Victims of Dahomian aggression immediately contested Agaja's authority and possession of conquered territory. Surviving Hueda made repeated attempts to retake their lands, particularly the town of Ouidah, where European traders had their factories. These challenges to Dahomey occupation continued through the mid-1770s.[54] In addition to regional opposition, powerful outside forces hindered Dahomey's consolidation efforts. In the late 1720s and early 1730s, and then again in the 1740s, the powerful Oyo kingdom, often allied with Dahomey's enemies, launched skillful cavalry attacks against Dahomey. A settlement was finally reached between the two kingdoms when Dahomey agreed to pay Oyo tribute in 1748.[55]

Internal divisions in the royal government further threatened the stability of the Dahomian state. A disputed succession followed the death of King Agaja in 1740 with Tegbesu, the younger of Agaja's sons, emerging as the next king.[56] Tegbesu's authority, however, continued to be challenged by his subjects, including local priests and merchants. To quell these internal disturbances, Tegbesu executed his opponents or sold

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[53] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 309.

[54] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 288-291, 298-300, 309, 322-324; Law, *Ouidah*, 53-55, 59-66; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 97. Hueda tradition cites 1775 as "the end of the resistance" to Dahomey, following the execution of then-leader, Agbamu. Quoted in Law, *Ouidah*, 65.

[55] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 287-295, 318-324; Law, *Ouidah*, 54-56, 60; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 13, 16; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 97. Dahomey continued as a tributary of Oyo until 1823. See Law, *The Slave Coast*, 323.

[56] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 325-327. For a detailed explanation of Tegbesu's succession see Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 81-91. Bay uses Dahomian oral narratives to reconstruct the struggle for power between Tegbesu and his rivals. She argues that "[d]isputed successions...may be seen not as a violation of order, but rather as part of the process for recreating authority at the state's center." A key element to Tegbesu's success was his mother, Hwanjile, whose protective charms allowed Tegbesu to safely live among the enemy Oyo as a boy. Once he was king, Tegbesu placed Hwanjile in the powerful position of kpojito. The office of kpojito was the highest position a woman could hold in the Dahomey royal government. For more on the role of the kpojito see Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 71-80, quote on 81.

them into the transatlantic slave trade.[57] Over time this policy of removal shifted to one of compromise with political enemies. The strategy of intimidation and concession aided Tegbesu's success in dismantling the opposition against him by the latter part of the 1750s.[58]

Continuing a process begun by Agaja, Tegbesu also sought legitimation of Dahomian rule by appropriating cultural practices of conquered groups.[59] Dahomey oral traditions credit Tegbesu's mother, Hwanjile, for adopting important local vodun spirits/deities and integrating them into Dahomian spiritual life. Edna Bay suggests that through Hwanjile's innovations and leadership, "by the end of Tegbesu's reign in 1774, the monarchy controlled the vodun and their followers through direct regulation and financial support of chapter houses."[60] In addition to the incorporation of religious rituals, Tegbesu and his successors made claims to descent from the Allada royal line through enthronement ceremonies.[61] These cultural adaptations in conjunction with an increasing willingness to assimilate rather than destroy conquered groups facilitated the eventual consolidation of Dahomian rule in the region. Dahomey remained in this dominant position until the French occupation in 1892.[62]

The consolidation period also included a change in policy towards the slave trade. Having cut out the middlemen in the operation with the overthrow of Allada and Hueda,

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[57] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 325-328; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard,* 92, 97; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 20-22. Agaja also used the slave trade as a way to remove potential opponents, particularly spiritual leaders that had many followers. Domingos Álvares was most likely one of the powerful priests that Agaja removed from the kingdom by selling him to slave traders. Álvares was sold at Jakin and shipped to Brazil between 1728 and 1732. See Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 22, 24, 26.

[58] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 328; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard,* 98.

[59] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 330-334; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 18-19. Law and Sweet both indicate that this cultural adaptation process was begun by Agaja and continued by Tegbesu.

[60] Bay, *Wives of the Leopard,* 92-93, quote on 93.

[61] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 330-332.

[62] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 309, 328-330; Law, *Ouidah*, 1; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 98, 119-120.

King Agaja relied on prisoners of war to supply European traders. This approach essentially continued Dahomey's previous role in the trade as a supplier, but the scale of conflict needed to satisfy the demand through war captives alone quickly became untenable.[63] Although political instability fueled the trade by providing the means to produce more captives, European traders often complained that this upheaval disrupted the trade. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Dahomian conquest, interior supply lines with Oyo were cut off.[64] Under Tegbesu's reign, however, peace with Oyo re-opened avenues of trade and Dahomey managed the sale of these slaves to European factors at Ouidah. Tegbesu appointed royal traders to conduct the exchange of the kingdom's slaves and allowed private traders to operate in Ouidah in a middleman role.[65]

Taking a long view, the Bight of Benin region underwent an extended period of political and social instability that corresponds to the growth of the trade in slaves with Europeans. As demand for slaves increased, so did the physical struggles over control of the trade. The violent mode of supplying enslaved men, women, and children combined with the economic advantages of and increased competition in selling them set off a vicious cycle of aggression to procure more slaves to meet European demand. Robin Law argues that Dahomey's rise to power was a direct consequence of this cycle, providing the state with the means and opportunity to conquer the Bight of Benin coastal groups.[66]

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[63] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 307, 340, 342, 349; Law, *Ouidah*, 111; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 13.
[64] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 306- 308; Law, *Ouidah*, 111.
[65] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 323, 340-341, 343; Law, *Ouidah*, 111, 127; Bay, 104-105, 109.
[66] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 225-226, 261, 345-349; Law, *Ouidah*, 49-50.

One Life in One Million

Dahomey's sudden seizure of power and the protracted process of consolidation that followed formed the immediate backdrop to Marie Couvent's birth (c. 1757) and enslavement (c. 1764) as a young girl. Between the 1720s and 1770s, the Slave Coast region endured intense turmoil, which many inhabitants experienced first-hand through combat, forced migrations, and loss of life and land.[67] Couvent's family very likely witnessed the death and destruction that accompanied Dahomey's overthrow of Allada and Hueda. Whether they experienced these things directly, her relatives certainly felt the reverberations of this political upheaval when Couvent was sold and shipped thousands of miles across the ocean.

From the 1660s onward, the number of enslaved Africans sold to European traders along the Bight of Benin grew steadily. The total number of slaves embarked increased more than 3.5 times from 20,443 individuals between 1660 and 1670 to 71,088 people sold in the last decade of the seventeenth century.[68] The volume of slave exports from the Bight of Benin reached its height, however, in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Between 1700 and 1730, a total of 372,588 enslaved individuals were embarked from the Slave Coast.[69] The most intense period of Dahomey's conquests, 1721-1730, saw a sharp spike in the number of exports. According to the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, the highest number of enslaved people exported in a single year

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[67] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 7, 13-15, 25; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 309, 349. For a description of the consequences of Dahomian aggression on the Hueda kingdom and its port town of Ouidah see Law, *Ouidah*, Chapter Two: "The Dahomian Conquest of Ouidah," 50-70.

[68] TSTD, accessed December 23, 2012, http://slavevoyages.org/tast /database /search.faces?yearFrom =1660&yearTo=1700&mjbyptimp=60500.

[69] TSTD, accessed December 23, 2012, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1700&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60500. James Sweet, citing an unpublished paper by David Eltis, gives the figure of 400,000 total individuals shipped from the Slave Coast between 1700 and 1725. However, the footnote also indicates that the TSTD places the total at 293,269 for this period. The reason for the discrepancy is not addressed. See Sweet, *Domingo Álvares*, 237, fn 8.

occurred in 1724 when 22,819 men, women, and children were shipped from Bight of Benin ports to the New World. Between 1726 and 1730, the number peaked at 82,023 people sold to transatlantic shippers. For the years after 1730, the totals of embarked slaves hovered around 100,000 per decade. Between 1761 and 1770, the period in which Couvent was sold, 94,772 individuals were exported. [70] Although the number of slaves embarked from the Bight of Benin per year fluctuated greatly due to disruptions of the trade caused by political conflict and warfare, over the course of the eighteenth century a total of 1,073,254 people were shipped across the Atlantic.[71] (Table 1) True to its European epithet, the Slave Coast exported far more slaves than its neighbors, the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra between 1700 and 1800.[72]

The slaves sold to European traders along the Bight of Benin came from multiple sources within a broad geographical area. Before the Dahomey conquest of the coastal region, individuals sold by Allada and Hueda often came from hinterland trade routes supplied by Dahomey, Oyo and other Yoruba-speaking groups, and even Muslim traders from northern Africa.[73] The lagoon system provided easy transportation of slaves from the eastern and western interior to European trading factories in Offra and Ouidah. From such a wide expanse, the slaves sold along the Bight of Benin belonged to various groups, but most were either Gbe- or Yoruba-speakers. One French trader claimed that

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[70] TSTD, accessed January 2, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1700&yearTo =1800&mjbyptimp=60500. The number of slaves sold from the Bight of Benin between 1721 and 1730 totaled 154,239. This was the highest decennial total for the eighteenth century.

[71] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 156-157, 166, 306, 341; TSTD, accessed January 2, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast /database/search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60500.

[72] The total number of exported Africans from the Gold Coast between 1700 and 1800 was 631,604 and the total from the Bight of Biafra was 707, 460. Compare these numbers to the 1,073,254 enslaved Africans shipped from the Bight of Benin in the same period. See TSTD, accessed January 2, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo =1800&mjbyptimp =60400.60500.60600.

[73] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 185; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 107.

Table 1: Total Number of Enslaved Individuals Shipped from the Bight of Benin, 1700-1800 by Nation of Ship

	Portugal / Brazil	Great Britain	Netherlands	U.S.A.	France	Denmark / Baltic	Totals
1700	5,343	2,381	1,074			542	9,340
1701-1705	24,903	10,556	8,116		3,850	349	47,774
1706-1710	24,913	9,611	8,517		5,567	373	48,981
1711-1715	27,697	8,877	5,773		12,103		54,450
1716-1720	27,730	9,932	6,047		14,095		57,804
1721-1725	42,241	9,923	3,172		16,880		72,216
1726-1730	48,100	9,027	3,481		21,415		82,023
1731-1735	36,481	3,550	6,348		14,066		60,445
1736-1740	29,871	1,680	1,877		21,283		54,711
1741-1745	26,834	1,377			17,911		46,122
1746-1750	36,234	2,241	553		8,274	284	47,586
1751-1755	32,061	3,386	621	83	28,169		64,320
1756-1760	31,360	7,312	281	95	1,046	73	40,167
1761-1765	26,251	12,060	1,168	56	7,067		46,602
1766-1770	25,892	8,779			13,499		48,170
1771-1775	19,226	10,499	335	205	19,418		49,683
1776-1780	23,083	6,352			20,441		49,876
1781-1785	32,708	5,061			8,660		46,429
1786-1790	19,969	9,722			31,080		60,771
1791-1795	25,848	11,803		290	3,796		41,737
1796-1800	36,058	7,913		76			44,047
Totals	602,803	152,042	47,363	805	268,620	1,621	1,073,254

Source: *Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*
http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60500

twenty to thirty different nations were represented by enslaved individuals sold at Ouidah in the early eighteenth century.[74] With the overthrow of Allada and Hueda, Dahomey took control of the trade at Ouidah, providing slaves gained largely through their own raids. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most slaves sold by Dahomey traders came from an area north of the capital city of Abomey and west of Oyo territory. Caught between these two powerful states, yet never truly conquered by either, the numerous small groups living in this area became known collectively as the Mahi. James Sweet describes Mahi as "a broad 'meta-ethnic' expression of many smaller units of identity, including Savalus, Iannos, and Aglonlis."[75] Eventually Oyo supplied slaves to Dahomian Ouidah but overall preferred places like Porto-Novo where they were allowed to deal directly with European buyers. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, slaves brought to Porto-Novo by Oyo traders came from as far inland as Hausa territory, over 400 miles from the coast.[76]

The process of enslavement for those individuals sold into the transatlantic trade differed, depending on time and place. Evidence of the trade in the Bight of Benin indicates that slaves came from a number of sources including local households or the palace, as well as slaves used as a payment of royal tribute between kingdoms. Political enemies could also be sold, as in the case of religious leaders who threatened King Tegbesu's consolidation efforts. Judicial enslavement as punishment for committing crimes constituted another way individuals wound up in the hands of European traders.[77]

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[74] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 185-189; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 14.
[75] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 15-16, quote on 16; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 190.
[76] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 186, 190-191.
[77] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 182, 184, 325-328; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 92, 97; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 20-22. All of these methods produced enslaved people in other parts of Africa, a well. See Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 108, 119, 122 and Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 99.

People could also be sold into slavery if they defaulted on a debt. Pawning— the practice of a creditor holding a person as collateral until a debt has been paid—existed in Slave Coast societies. If a debtor defaulted, the person held as a pawn or even the debtor himself could be sold as a slave. Most pawns remained within the domestic slave market, although evidence suggests that in some cases pawns ended up in the transatlantic trade.[78]

The most common means by which individuals were captured in the transatlantic trade, however, was through during military conflicts.[79] If some of those enslaved for household, tributary, judicial, or debt service found their way onto European slave ships by coercive yet relatively peaceful transactions, many more ended up there through violence and overt force.[80] In addition to prisoners of war, captives were also garnered through raids, banditry, and kidnapping. All of these methods were utilized prior to European arrival, but Robin Law argues that in the specific example of Dahomey's rise to power, the line between war and banditry became difficult to distinguish.[81] A portion of prisoners taken by Dahomian soldiers in military campaigns were sacrificed and the heads of elite enemies kept as trophies of conquest. The majority of captives, however, were enslaved. Technically all belonged to the king, who could either keep individuals to

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[78] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 68, 182; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 108, 119, 122; Toyin Falola and Paul Lovejoy, "Pawnship in Historical Perspective" in *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, eds., Paul Lovejoy and Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 1, 3; Robin Law, "On Pawning and Enslavement for Debt in the Precolonial Slave Coast," in Lovejoy and Falola, *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism*, 58, 62, 64-65. Law suggests that occasions of debt bondage leading to export occurred among the Hueda and Allada in the pre-Dahomian era. The Dahomey kingdom's policy restricted the sale of pawns and debtors to the internal market (i.e. between Dahomians), forbidding debt slaves to be sold into the transatlantic trade. See pages 65-67.

[79] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 184-185, 340, 348; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 118-119; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 99; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 20-22; Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 13.

[80] Kopytoff and Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," 14.

[81] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 225, 346; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 119-121; Kopytoff and Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," 13; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 99.

be used in the domestic economy or could sell the captives to European traders for export to the American colonies.[82] The latter choice, as Stephanie Smallwood points out, "provided an expedient means for managing the human by-product of expansionist state building."[83]

Whether an enslaved person remained in Africa or was shipped across the Atlantic depended on a number of factors including his or her sex, age, and health. Specific circumstances of time and place also mattered. Differences among export regions, the culture and politics of African societies involved in the trade, and methods of enslavement all played a role in determining if an individual ended up in the transatlantic trade. These conditions, combined with the preferences of African sellers, European traders, and New World buyers, on one hand, and the unique considerations necessary for the traffic in humans, on the other, affected the ratios of men, women, and children sold to European traders at any given time.[84]

To a considerable degree, the sex of an enslaved person influenced his or her fate. Typically, African merchants sold more enslaved men to European traders and retained more enslaved women for local use, whether in the royal palaces, households, or to be sold in the trans-Saharan market.[85] The difference in numbers of exported men and women varied among ethnic groups, and shifts over time occurred within regions. Yet,

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[82] Law, *The Slave Coast*, 269-270, 272.

[83] Although Smallwood's quote specifically refers to the Gold Coast, this statement can be applied to the Dahomian conquest of the Slave Coast, as well. See Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 23.

[84] David Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records," *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), 27, 37-43; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 5, 24, 26, 35-36, 50-53, 60, 66, 70; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 76-77, 81-84; Paul Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery- the Transatlantic Phase," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 27, no. 2 (August 2006), 197-198.

[85] Joseph Miller, "Introduction," in *Women and Slavery: Africa and the Western Indian Ocean Islands*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 3; Claire Robertson and Martin Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, eds. Robertson and Klein (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 3, 5.

overall, this distinct divide along male/female lines characterized trading in the Slave Coast region as well as the more general pattern in West and Central Africa. [86]

Market forces and gendered labor divisions on both sides of the Atlantic played a role in determining the numbers of enslaved men and women shipped from Africa. While European traders and their colonial American buyers preferred young adult males to work on plantations, the ways in which African societies' incorporated enslaved females into their own communities substantially shaped the composition of the trade.[87] In his study of the eighteenth-century French trade, David Geggus found that that more men were exported from African societies organized by matrilineal descent as well as those that more extensively utilized women in agriculture.[88] Although Dahomey was a patrilineal society, female slaves served important functions in palace organization and were therefore often kept by the king rather than sold abroad. [89] Religious beliefs and political practices factored in as well. Paul Lovejoy argues that Muslim groups in the interior played a critical role in retaining female slaves for local markets and especially the trans-Saharan trade, which, in turn, significantly lowered the number of women in the transatlantic trade.[90] This Islamic preference to keep female slaves relates to a strong correlation between the sex ratio of enslaved exports and the distance slaves were

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[86] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 53-56; Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 27-28, 36, 40-41; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 67, 167-168, 272; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 146; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 163-164; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 27, 83-84.

[87] Paul Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 197-198; Lovejoy, "Internal Markets or an Atlantic-Sahara Divide?: How Women Fit into the Slave Trade of West Africa" in Campbell, Miers, and Miller, *Women and Slavery*, 259-260; Audra Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 27, no. 2 (August 2006), 186-187; Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 37-43.

[88] Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 37-38.

[89] Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 14, 142-143. Not only did enslaved women enlarge the palace institution through their incorporation as wives of the king, they also worked in a broad variety of "administrative and cultural" capacities. Edna Bay explains that female slaves made ideal wives for the king because, according to the dictates of Dahomian society, they were "socialized to serve the lineage" they married into as women, but they "lacked kin obligations and protections" as slaves. See Bay, 143-144.

[90] Lovejoy, "Internal Markets or an Atlantic-Sahara Divide?," 260-261.

brought to the coast. The further away captives were transported, the higher the percentage of males among them. More women and children were exported from societies within 100 miles of the coast.[91]

On the whole, women made up an estimated 40 percent of the twelve million enslaved individuals forced across the Atlantic.[92] Exact figures for slaves embarked from the Bight of Benin are difficult to calculate because most records did not include statistics on the sex or age of captives. However, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* provides some idea of the numbers of men, women, and children shipped from this region and overall supports the general assessment of a higher rate of men and boys than women and girls exported to the Americas. The highest percentage of women in the transatlantic trade from the Slave Coast occurred in the early seventeenth century when women made up around 42 percent of the total number of slaves shipped. In the mid-eighteenth century, when Marie Couvent was enslaved, the average percentage of women in the trade was 37.5 percent.[93] (Table 2)

Statistically speaking, Couvent's export to Saint-Domingue as a young girl placed her in a minority demographic of the transatlantic slave trade. *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* indicates that children made up 19 percent of slaves shipped from the Bight of Benin to the Caribbean between 1751 and 1775.[94] This figure is on par with the

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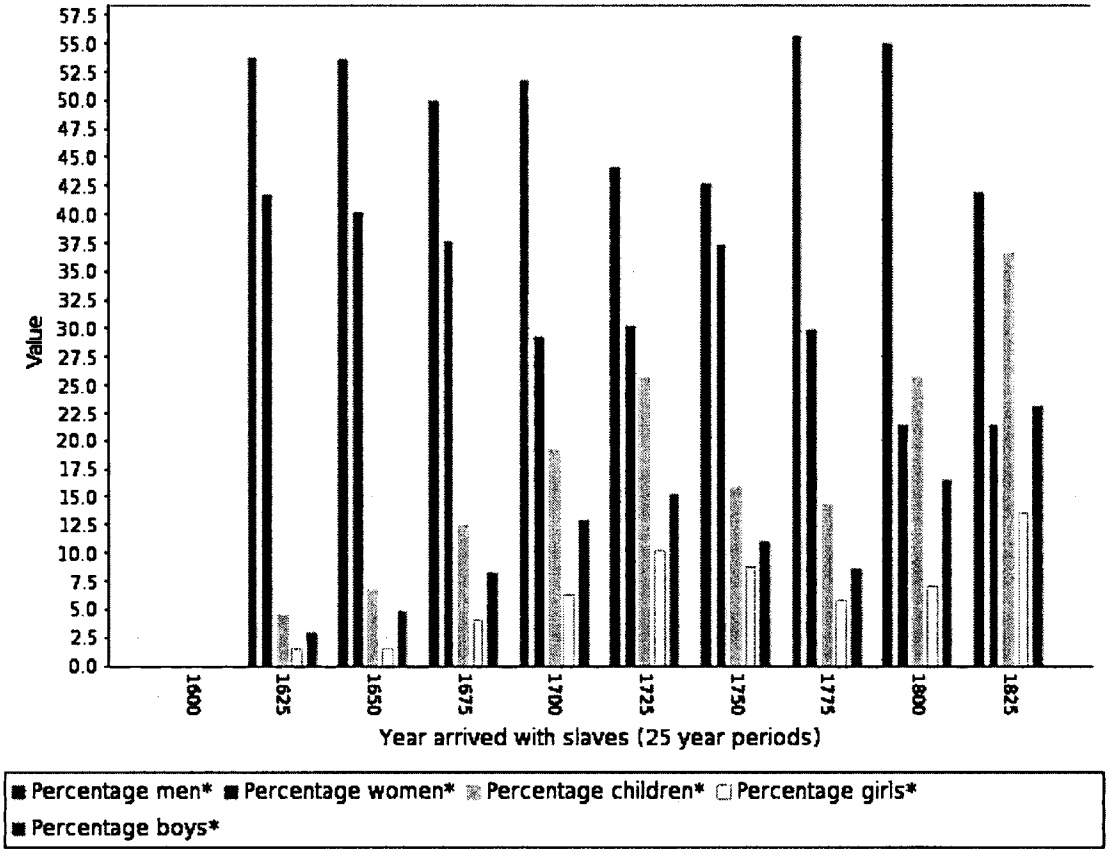
[91] Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 37-38; Paul Lovejoy, "The Yoruba Factor in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds. Toyin Falola and Matt Childs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 48-50.

[92] Miller, "Introduction," 4. Miller estimates about 5 million of the over 12 million slaves in the Atlantic trade were women.

[93] TSTD, accessed January 23, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom =1600&yearTo=1850&mjbyptimp=60500.

[94] TSTD, accessed March 8, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1514&yearTo=1866&mjbyptimp=60500. The number of voyages that listed the slaves' ages and sex was much smaller than the total number of voyages during this period and these percentages reflect that smaller number. This means that sorting the database by different criteria affects the results. Thus, the average

Table 2: Percentages of Enslaved Men, Women, Girls, and Boys Exported from the Bight of Benin between 1600 and 1850



Note: Of the 32,545 voyages in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database for 1600-1850, only 3,835 voyages included the breakdown of slaves by sex and 4,199 included the breakdown by age. The percentages reflect those smaller sets.

Source: *Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*
http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1600&yearTo=1850&mjbyptimp=60500

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percent of children shipped from the Bight of Benin to all locations between 1750 and 1775 was 15.8. The number of children exported from the Bight of Benin reached its height between 1826 and 1850. The regions with the highest percentages of children exported in the nineteenth century were West Central African and South East Africa. See TSTD and Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 200-202, 207-208.

Slave traders distinguished "children" from "adults" using inconsistent age and height criteria. Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 26, fn 14. Since prices depended on age, this needed to be determined at the time of sale. According to Diptee, British traders used height to determine age, counting anyone who measured under 4' 4'' as a child. They used other physical markers of age as well. Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 185; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 30-31. Lovejoy indicates that legal codes for Portuguese trading allowed for a distinction in capacity for the numbers of children and adults on a ship. This encouraged traders to classify adults as children on the shipping registers. For the most part, children were classified as those individuals older than infants but who had not yet reached puberty. Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 198-200.

average percent for children in the overall trade, which was about 20 percent, although the percentage of children enslaved in the nineteenth century rose considerably—to over 50 percent in some regions.[95] Boys, however, outnumbered girls throughout the scope of the transatlantic slave trade.[96]

When it came to women and children African supply and New World demand often complemented one another. For the most part, slave ship captains did not want to purchase children because they were considered a burden, particularly infants and the very young. Through much of the eighteenth century, at least, colonial American buyers preferred young adult males over women, children, and older adults of either sex.[97] Prices reflected these preferences. On both sides of the Atlantic, enslaved children cost much less than adults. From a European trader's point of view, then, a shipment containing more children than adults would earn less of a profit on the American end. Lower prices within the African market also meant more enslaved children were retained locally.[98]

Although overall proportions of men, women, and children mirror these general preferences, the reality of the slave trading enterprise was much more complicated. Indeed, the presence of women and children on slave ships indicates the difficulties

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[95] TSTD, accessed March 11, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1514&yearTo=1866; Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 201-202.

[96] Although, again, the differences varied by place and time period. See TSTD, accessed March 11, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866; Lovejoy, "The Children of the Slavery," 203-204, 206-207.

[97] Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 197, 207; Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 186-187; Diptee, *From African to Jamaica*, 25. In her study of the British slave trade to Jamaica between 1775 and 1807, Audra Diptee found evidence that planter preference began to shift away from adult male slaves during this period. She argues that higher importation taxes on adult slaves combined with apprehension of a large population of enslaved men in the colony resulted in requests for more women and children. Paul Lovejoy credits the rise in proportions of children in the nineteenth century trade, in part, to the expansion of coffee production in Brazil, in which lower-priced children could be used easily. See Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 25, 27-39 and Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery,"207.

[98] Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 211. Audra Diptee points out, however, that there were some instances in which a healthy child could be worth more than a sick adult. See Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 35.

involved in the "mechanics of slave trading."[99] The traders' objective to make a profit permeated all aspects of the slave trade, including the demography of the shipments. Ultimately, the ability of ship captains and their patrons to maximize a return hinged on keeping their enslaved human "cargo" alive, at least long enough to sell the slaves to American buyers.[100]

The most cost-effective approach to the slave trade, according to captains and shipping managers, alike, required slave ships to spend the least amount of time on the African coast and to conduct the shortest trip possible across the ocean. The longer traders tarried at the slaving ports to procure large shipments, and the longer it took to transport the captives to the Americas, the greater the chances of disease, death, and revolt on the high seas. With these factors in mind, captains worked as quickly as possible to fill their ships with as many *healthy* Africans as could be acquired, with sex, age, and "ethnicity" only secondary concerns.[101]

European traders faced a number of challenges in completing this task. Quite often not enough captives were on hand immediately to fill slavers' ships.[102] In his study of Ouidah, Robin Law found that Dahomian traders did not amass large numbers of slaves to be purchased and loaded upon arrival of a European ship. Rather, the supply of enslaved individuals trickled down to the coast in small groups where they were purchased piecemeal. Captains could wait months for enough captive Africans to arrive

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[99] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 26, 35, 44, 49, quote on 60; Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 198.

[100] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica,* 4-5, 22, 26, 35-37; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery,* 44, 157.

[101] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica,* 4-5, 26, 35-37; Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 190; Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 198, 206.

[102] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 77; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery,* 86-87.

to complete a load.[103] To speed up the process, traders often visited more than one port or even more than one region to gather enough slaves to pack the hold.[104] In this situation, the purchase of children at lower prices than that of adults could be advantageous since their smaller bodies could fill in tightly packed spaces.[105] Moreover, on the coast, African traders held the upper hand and often hindered a quick turnaround for European ships by demanding high prices for slaves and supplies for the return trip or not accepting the trade goods proffered.[106] In the end, ship captains frequently found themselves in a position in which they were forced to accept less desirable slaves, including more women than men, children, older adults, or the infirm.

These methods of procuring slaves guaranteed an assortment of enslaved individuals. Slaves taken in combat were often men, but warfare left women, children, and older people without protection. Females, as well as the young, the old, and the sick or injured were also more vulnerable to slave raiding and kidnapping, which tended to be indiscriminate in its prey.[107] Pawning also exposed more children to the slave trade, as adults commonly used children as collateral.[108] In a related situation, famine, drought, or other catastrophes forced families to sell members, especially children, into slavery. After the Dahomey conquest, for example, Huedas who sought refuge in Popo territory were "obliged to sell their wives, children and servants for provisions, and other necessaries,

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[103] Law, *Ouidah*, 132-133. Other trading areas were similar. Audra Diptee describes the experience of a British trader on the Bight of Biafra, in which it took six months and a total of 328 separate transactions to complete a shipment of 566 individuals. The most people he purchased at one time was six. See Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 77.

[104] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 42; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 86-87.

[105] Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 211-212.

[106] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 42, 61.

[107] Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 38; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 50, 52; Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 184.

[108] Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 38; Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 206; Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 187; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 56-57.

because they had no money left" to pay their hosts.[109] Perhaps bearing witness to these circumstances, the mean percentage of children exported from the Bight of Benin between 1726 and 1750 reached 25.6, with an average of 39.2 percent from Popo alone.[110]

In the pursuit of the healthiest slaves at the cheapest price, access to provisions to sustain the ship's crew and "cargo" on the transatlantic voyage was an essential element of the equation. A portion of the goods and currency that Europeans brought with them to trade for enslaved Africans went towards food, water, and other supplies necessary for the trip to the Americas. Without adequate rations, captains risked high levels of disease and death onboard. African traders controlled the prices and availability of provisions as well as that of captives. Captains forced to pay more for slaves than planned had to reduce their expenses for supplies. Conversely, larger loads could exceed provisions purchased. In addition, longer wait times on the African coast meant depleted rations for the actual voyage.[111] Stephanie Smallwood argues that "balancing the cost of slaves' maintenance against their purchase price" was "a thoroughly scientific enterprise." Through trial and error, both African and European traders had to determine the threshold of sustaining human life in the cheapest way possible.[112]

Yet, even the most minimal mitigation of starvation and disease needed to maintain the bottom line threw into relief the humanity of the enslaved. The captives'

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[109] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 55-56; Law, "On Pawning and Enslavement for Debt," 64-65, quote on 65 from William Snelgrave's *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, 113.

[110] TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom =1514&yearTo=1866&mjbyptimp=60500. The figures were particularly high from ports near (former) Hueda and Popo territory: 39.2% from Popo, 28% from Little Popo, 31% from Jakin, and 25.9% from Ouidah. Again, these averages come from a voyage sample that is much smaller than the total voyages made during this period.

[111] Diptee, From *Africa to Jamaica*, 39-41, 78; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery,* 45-47.

[112] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery,* 35, quotes on 43-44.

human nature further manifested itself in individual and collective reactions to the trauma of enslavement, including attempted escape, suicide, or onboard rebellion. The undeniable fact that enslaved Africans were indeed human, with bodies that required basic necessities to function and the willpower to make decisions and perform actions, clearly distinguished them from other types of export merchandise found in the Atlantic maritime trade. Traders constantly had to negotiate this reality even as they attempted to overcome it, exposing the inherent violence in the process of "turning African captives into Atlantic commodities."[113]

The Long Middle Passage

For many people that violence began with their initial enslavement, particularly if they were captured in battle or by a raiding party. Emotional and mental trauma accompanied physical force. The point of seizure was usually near the captive's home and therefore the surroundings were likely recognizable. As they were slowly moved closer to the Atlantic coast, however, captives could be sold numerous times. Each transaction placed the enslaved in the hands of strangers in unfamiliar places. Meanwhile, the chance of escape diminished the further an individual traveled into foreign territory. African traders mostly transported their captives by foot in groups called coffles, unless the route followed accessible waterways. They often employed their captives as porters on these treks and used various forms of constraint, including chains, ropes, and wooden

[113] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 26, 35; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 34-36, quote from title of chapter two, 33; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), 10.

collars to keep captives from running away. [114] A British traveler watched the countenance of a young girl transform from "serenity" to "the deepest distress" when she was sold: "The terror she manifested in having the load put upon her head and the rope fastened around her neck, and the sorrow with which she bade adieu to her companions, was truly affecting."[115]

In the Bight of Benin region those captives destined for the transatlantic trade had to be removed to one of several ports on the coast. The largest and most important of these places was Ouidah. The former Hueda town became Dahomey's only port after it destroyed nearby Jakin in 1732. During the period surrounding Marie Couvent's enslavement, Ouidah saw the greatest volume of exported slaves of all Bight of Benin ports, although competition from places like Badagry, Epe, and Porto-Novo intensified around this time.[116] Even with increased exports from these other places, however, most enslaved individuals shipped from the Slave Coast to Saint-Domingue between 1750 and 1770 were embarked from Ouidah.[117] Statistically, at least, Marie Couvent very likely left West Africa from this Dahomey-controlled trading center.

Although commonly referred to as a port, Ouidah is not on the ocean. Rather, the town is located about 2.5 miles from the coast on the far side of a lagoon that separates it from the beach. In fact, the coastline along the Bight of Benin contains no natural harbors

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[114] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 67-68; Smallwood, 54; Colin Palmer, "The Middle Passage," in *Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 56; John Thornton, "Africa: The Source" in *Captive Passage*, 42.

[115] Quoted in Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 56.

[116] Law, *Ouidah*, 125; TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces ?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500.

[117] TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces ?yearFrom =1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400. Between 1750 and 1770, a total of 54,185 individuals were embarked from Ouidah, and of those, 24,729 individuals disembarked in Saint-Domingue. Epe and Badagry, two ports to the east of Ouidah, saw the next largest shares of exported Africans to Saint-Domingue during this period with 5,752 slaves and 4,648 slaves embarked, respectively.

where ships can safely land. Dangerous surf created by sandbars required large slave ships to navigate only within one to two miles of the shore. In order to reach the beach safely, ship captains anchored before the sandbars and traveled the remaining distance in small boats. Africans from the Gold Coast, skilled in navigating canoes along the Atlantic coastline, were employed to transfer trade items, slaves, and supplies between the shore and the ships. Although people living in the coastal area of the Bight of Benin utilized boats for fishing, travel, and trade along the extensive lagoon system, they did not extend their sailing to the sea, and therefore, had little to no experience with the ocean.[118]

Ouidah served as a principal center for the transatlantic slave trade before and after the Dahomian conquest. First Hueda and then Dahomey state authorities maintained tight control over the trade, in part, by insisting on a free trade strategy which forced European nations to compete against each other for slaves.[119] A succession of European trading companies and representatives of the various monarchies existed in Ouidah, which contained three trading "forts" or "factories." The French West Indies Company constructed the first fort in Ouidah in 1671. When this structure was destroyed in 1692, a new French fort replaced it in 1704. The British and Portuguese erected trading factories nearby, and all three were fortified, two-story buildings made of mud with thatched roofs. Unlike the European trading posts on the Gold Coast, such as Elmina Castle, "[t]he forts in Ouidah operated as secure places of storage for goods and slaves, rather than

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[118] Law, *Ouidah*, 18, 29; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 153, 206; Robin Law, "Between the Sea and the Lagoons: The Interaction of Maritime and Inland Navigation on the Precolonial Slave Coast," *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, Vol. 29, Issue 114, (1989): 209-213; Kenneth Kelly, "Archaeological Perspectives on the Atlantic Slave Trade: Contrasts in Time and Space in Benin and Guinea," in *Slavery In Africa: Archaeology and Memory*, eds., Paul Lane and Kevin Macdonald, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 129-130.

[119] Law, *Ouidah*, 30, 71, 123, 127; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 152-153, 206; Kelly, "Archaeological Perspectives on the Atlantic Slave Trade," 127.

exercising any serious military power over the local community."[120] Over time, the forts became the hubs of separate quarters in the town where the mostly African employees (enslaved and free) of each factory lived.[121]

Under Dahomian rule, however, Ouidah also fulfilled an important political role as a government outpost and military base. The town expanded to include a garrison and the administrative quarter, where the Yovogan or "viceroy" lived. Translating to "Captain of the Whites," the Yovogan was an appointed position that oversaw the administration of Ouidah and the operation of the slave trade. The Yovogan managed the collection of export duties, customs, taxes, and tolls and settled civil and criminal cases.[122] The Yovogan also supervised the slave trade, which involved six appointed "royal traders" and independent merchants. The royal traders sold the king's slaves, including those from the palace as well as any captives taken in Dahomian wars. The independent merchants served in a middle man position by purchasing slaves from other African traders in the interior and selling these people to Europeans. The Yovogan managed a number of subordinates, including duty collectors and interpreters who aided trade negotiations. The line between private and royal merchant was often blurred and evidence suggests that the Yovogan participated in the trade as a seller as well as an administrator.[123]

The Yovogan and other Dahomian officials tightly controlled the sales process. Each European ship captain who wanted to trade at Ouidah had first to pay customs based on a set number of slaves at a fixed rate. The king had the right of first sale, which

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[120] Law, *Ouidah*, 31, 33-34, quote on 36.

[121] Law, *Ouidah*, 37, 39. For example, in 1789 the French fort contained 207 slaves, which included numerous distinct families. In addition, free employees and their families also lived in the quarter. The total estimated population of the French fort was 500.

[122] Law, *Ouidah*, 71-72, 99, 103-106, 108-109; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 207. The Hueda first employed the title "Yovogan" or "Yevogan" and Dahomey continued its use. Although this position carried many responsibilities, its power remained severely restricted through control and oversight by the king.

[123] Law, *Ouidah*, 100-101, 103, 105, 111-116.

meant that European traders had to make a purchase from the king before they could trade with anyone else. This gave the king first choice (or refusal) of the goods offered for trade. Customarily, these initial purchases from the king were a set number of enslaved individuals, often children sold at adult prices. Once the ship captain made this payment the trading could commence, and the official "bell-ringer" sounded the chime.[124]

Like their counterparts elsewhere, victims of the trade often endured multiple sales and a traumatic journey before they reached Ouidah, their final point of sale before transshipment. Captives taken by Dahomian soldiers in combat were walked from Abomey, about a sixty-mile trip, arriving weak and exhausted. Once in Ouidah they awaited sale in chains, confined in secure structures called "trunks" or "*ganho,*" which means "iron hut." Rather than a central holding cell, these buildings were located at individual traders' households. Buyers sent agents to the traders' residences to inspect the slaves and negotiate the sales.[125]

Despite the debilitated physical and often mental state of their captives, African traders took pains to prepare them for sale. To give the impression of youth and healthiness, traders oiled captives' skin, shaved their heads to hide gray hair, and sometimes dressed the women in fancy garments. In order to determine the condition of health and age of the slaves offered for sale, every ship's crew included a surgeon who physically examined each individual through a highly invasive procedure that included inspecting their teeth and checking for venereal diseases.[126] Even as a child, Marie

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[124] Law, *Ouidah*, 127-129, 132; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 57. In 1750, for example, the customs rate consisted of the value of ten slaves at a rate lower than market price per slave, with an additional slave purchased to begin the trading. That same year, European traders had to purchase four young boys from the king at adult prices before any other trading commenced. See Law, *Ouidah*, 127 and 129.

[125] Law, *Ouidah*, 132, 138-139. "Ganho" is a Fon word, the language spoken by Dahomians.

[126] Law, *Ouidah*, 141.

Couvent would have undergone this corporeal assessment. Dutch merchant Willem Bosman explained that "[the captives] are thoroughly examined, even to the smallest member, and that naked too both men and women, without the least distinction or modesty."[127] To make sure they only purchased adolescent males, Portuguese traders resorted to licking enslaved men's faces to determine whether or not they could grow facial hair. This method of testing age also allowed traders to determine illness through the taste of the captives' sweat.[128]

The king of Dahomey established the price per slave, calculated in ounces. This unit of measure equated a set amount of each type of good to an ounce of gold. Commonly traded goods included currency in the form of cowry shells, cloth, iron, and guns. In the 1770s, one ounce equaled 16,000 cowries, four iron bars, or eight pieces of cloth. New World products including tobacco, rum, and gold were also desired by Dahomian traders. In 1773, for example, a French ship captain paid ten ounces for adult men, seven ounces for adult women and boys, and six ounces per girl. At the price of six ounces, Marie Couvent could have been purchased for 96,000 cowries, 24 iron bars, or 48 pieces of cloth. Although the prices were fixed, they could still fluctuate over the course of a shipment. Extant ship logs indicate that prices rose as captains came closer to filling their holds, suggesting that Dahomian traders took advantage of their trading partners' desire for a quick turnaround.[129]

Once the traders completed their purchases, ship captains branded the newly-purchased enslaved individuals. These marks prohibited Dahomian traders from

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[127] Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into The Gold, The Slave, and The Ivory Coasts* (London, 1705), The Making Of The Modern World (U100432963), 364; Law, *Ouidah*, 141.

[128] Law, *Ouidah*, 141; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 29.

[129] Law, *Ouidah*, 129-131; Law, *The Slave Coast*, 199-205; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 14.

switching out purchased slaves with less desirable individuals and kept European traders from mixing up the slaves they bought.[130] Captain Thomas Phillips described the scarring process as he practiced it in the late seventeenth century: "we mark'd the slaves in the breast or shoulder, with a hot iron, having the letter of the ship's name on it, the place being before anointed with a little palm oil, which caus'd but little pain, the mark being usually well in four or five days, appearing very plain and white after."[131] Despite Phillips' suggestion to the contrary, branding was certainly a painful procedure.

The symbolic meaning of these stamps of possession was not lost on the people who received them.[132] Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, who was enslaved and shipped to Brazil from Ouidah in the nineteenth century, described being branded in his biography: "Whilst at this place, the slaves were all put into a pen, and placed with our backs to the fire, and ordered not to look about us, and to insure obedience, a man was placed in front with a whip in his hand ready to strike the first who should dare to disobey orders; another man then went round with a hot iron, and branded us the same as they would the heads of barrels or any other inanimate goods or merchandize [sic]."[133] By branding the captives' flesh, slave traders attempted to treat the people they purchased the same as the cloths and iron for which they were traded. Yet, the necessary threat of the whip belied this simple equation, highlighting the violent nature of commodification.

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[130] Law, *Ouidah*, 141-142.

[131] Thomas Phillips, *A Journal of a Voyage Made in the Hannibal of London, Ann. 1693, 1694, From England, to Cape's Monseradoe, in Africa, And thence along the Coast of Guiney to Whidaw, the Island of St. Thomas, An so forward to Barbadoes* (London, 1732), 218, accessed March 30, 2013, http://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de /search?oclcno=220578144; Law, *Ouidah*, 142.

[132] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 93-95.

[133] Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy, eds., *The Biography of Mahomma Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), 149-150; Law, *Ouidah*, 142.

After those captives deemed "acceptable" were sold, they became the responsibility of the European traders that purchased them. Slaves bought from private merchants were taken to the European factories where they were chained and imprisoned until embarked on the ship. Slaves sold for the king likely remained in the holding pen on the Yovogan's property until marched to the beach. It is not known what happened to captives that were too young, too old, or too unhealthy to be sold. According to Robin Law, captives were embarked as soon as they were purchased, if the weather permitted. Loading times varied, and captives could remain imprisoned for months before the transatlantic voyage began. Comparably dreadful conditions existed in the on-land trunks and the ships' holds. People remained confined in cramped spaces with minimal water and nutrition. With many of their bodies already in vulnerable states of health, enslaved individuals remained greatly susceptible to illness in such unsanitary settings. Starvation and infectious diseases like dysentery and smallpox were common, and the risk of death was high.[134]

When it came time to load the ship the slaves and supplies had to be transported from Ouidah to the beach. This trip required crossing the lagoon, which was usually done on foot. Captives were marched the 2.5 miles from Ouidah to the ocean in chains, although children may have made this walk unrestrained. During the rainy months, particularly between April and July, the water level could reach the height of an adult man's neck and sometimes canoes were necessary to cross this swampy area. Once on the

[134] Law, *Ouidah*, 137, 140-141; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 47-51; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 75, 78, 84.

beach, Dahomian traders removed the slaves' clothing so that they boarded the ship naked and remained that way unless the captain provided them new clothes.[135]

Arriving at the ocean must have been a terrifying experience for the captives embarked from Ouidah. Most people from inland areas had never seen the ocean, and even those who lived closer to the coast likely had no experience of the Atlantic. According to numerous European observers, the rough sea along the Slave Coast was especially menacing.[136] Willem Bosman described Ouidah as "so incommodious and dangerous, by reason of the horrible Burnings in the Sea, that we cannot land here without running a great Risque..."[137] Unable to navigate the sandbars, slave ships remained safely anchored about a mile offshore. The final stretch between the beach and the ship involved a treacherous canoe ride through the breakers. To prevent slaves from jumping from the canoes and attempting to swim to shore, they were chained together in the boats. Despite this precaution, some individuals did decide to jump from the canoe, usually to disastrous results. The large, dugout canoes faced the risk of overturning in the dangerous surf, and if they did, their passengers easily drowned or were killed by sharks that patrolled the waters near the shoreline.[138]

The vastness of the open water, the rough surf, and the threat of capsizing surely frightened Marie Couvent, especially at her young age. It is likely that she had a similar reaction to this canoe trip as that of a seven year old girl who was given to the Scottish

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[135] Law, *Ouidah,* 18, 26, 142-144; Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea,* 364. According to Robert Louis Stein, most French ship captains provided a small cloth to women but the men remained naked. Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 102.

[136] Law, "Between the Sea and the Lagoons," 209, 211-213; Law, Ouidah, 29, 144; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 34.

[137] Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea,*337; Law, "Between the Sea and the Lagoons," 211.

[138] Law, *Ouidah*, 18, 135-136, 144; Law, "Between the Sea and the Lagoons," 226-227; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 34-35.

traveler John Duncan as a gift for the Queen of England by the Dahomian king in 1845. Duncan explained that "[t]he little Mahee [Mahi] girl in my charge had never before seen the sea, and consequently felt much alarm." He had to coax her into the boat with promises that she would soon be returned to her "Abomey mother," the Dahomian woman who kept her in the capital where she was enslaved. The girl was rightfully afraid because "the sea was very high and the surf heavy," and as the canoe set out, a wave "passed over us from bow to stern, filling it, but for the buoyancy of the wood which it is formed, must have sunk." Surely shocked by the dousing of cold saltwater and the turbulent rocking of the boat, "[t]he little girl, who was upon her knees in the bottom of the canoe, had certainly little cause to be pleased with sea life, and is very likely to remember her first sea voyage for a long time. As soon as the little creature was able, for she was almost suffocated by the surf, she called out for her Abomey mother."[139] Perhaps the child who grew up to be the woman known as Marie Couvent called out for her own mother, as the canoe carried her across the tremendous swells and crashing breakers.

Although Couvent was in the canoe with other enslaved men, women, and children, these people were likely to be strangers or acquaintances rather than her family members. European traders observed that children were commonly enslaved, sold, and boarded onto the ship without parents or other close relatives.[140] Statistics from the slave trade support this evidence. David Geggus concludes that "[i]n the French Slave trade, the two African regions exporting the highest proportions of women (Senegambia and

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[139] John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 and 1846, Comprising a Journey from Whydah, through the Kingdom of Dahomey, to Adofoodia, in the Interior*, Volume II (London: Richard Bentley, 1847), 286, quotes on 298-299, accessed March 30, 2013, http://www.archive.org/stream /travelsinwester00duncgoog#page/n8/mode/2up; Law, *Ouidah*, 144. Law explains that the little girl's "Abomey mother" was "her foster-mother in captivity in Dahomey."

[140] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 57-58; Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 189.

Bight of the Benin) actually exported the lowest proportions of children. Most African children carried across the Atlantic were evidently sold separately from their mothers."[141] Even if Couvent's parents, siblings, or other relatives were captured and brought to Ouidah at the same time, there was no guarantee that they would be sold together or even placed on the same ship. Preserving intact families did not concern traders when making their purchases. In some cases, family members did end up together on the same ship. Upon disembarking, however, these individuals were once again sold and likely separated from each other at the point of sale.[142]

Once the canoe reached the ship, the captive passengers were transferred to the larger vessel. Each had to climb a rope ladder that hung down the side of the slave ship, guarded at the bottom by the African canoemen, and into the arms of the sailors upon reaching the top.[143] At this point the slaves were placed in the holds below the main deck. The holds were small, cramped spaces with little ventilation or light. Although size and tonnage of slaving vessels varied, the amount of space each individual captive occupied below deck remained about the same. On average, the holds allotted five to seven square feet to each enslaved person.[144] Most adults could not stand up straight in the hold. These spaces remained dark and dank and became stifling hot during the day. The captives spent upwards of sixteen hours a day in the holds, where disease spread quickly and human waste accumulated, creating a horrific smell. [145]

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[141] Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade," 273. Paul Lovejoy draws the same conclusion using a broader sample from *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. See Lovejoy, "The Children of Slavery," 204-205.

[142] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 58-60, 86.

[143] Robert Harms, *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 254.

[144] Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 59-60.

[145] Harms, *The Diligent,* 245; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 68-69, 120.

After the slaves were loaded onto the ship, they would be separated by sex and age. While the captain remained onshore procuring enslaved individuals to sell in the colonies, the ship's carpenter labored to ready the vessel to accommodate the purchased slaves. This work involved creating a partition in the lower deck to form separate quarters for male and female captives and building a barricade on the main deck that made a protective area for the ship's crew and further isolated the enslaved women from the men.[146] Girls were usually kept with the women, but on many ships boys were held in a separate compartment from all other groups.[147]

Men, women, and children were accorded different degrees of incarceration while onboard. Adult men experienced the greatest limits to their movement and space, being chained together in pairs. Usually iron shackles connected one man's left ankle to another man's right ankle making rapid movement difficult. The men remained in chains while in the hold, and depending on the captain's preference, may have stayed chained throughout the entire trip. Some captains allowed adult men to move around unshackled on the main deck during periods of exercise once the ship had sailed into the open ocean. Women often endured the voyage unrestrained, and children were usually allowed freedom of movement.[148] Thus, Marie Couvent's experience of the Middle Passage would have been different from that of the men and perhaps even the women on the ship with her. Audra Diptee argues that this relative freedom may have alleviated the deadly conditions of the ship enough to enable a greater survival rate for enslaved children.[149]

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[146] Harms, *The Diligent,* 250-251; Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 85.

[147] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica,* 82; Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 68-69;

[148] Harms, *The Diligent,* 254, 295, 314-315; Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 102; Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 60; Diptee, 82; James Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York: WW Norton, 1981), 298.

[149] Diptee, "African Children in the British Slave Trade," 191.

Traveling unrestrained may have relieved some physical discomfort and lowered the chances of succumbing to illness, but it did not protect children against other forms of brutality. Sexual abuse, especially of women and girls, was common.[150] Several British participants in the slave trade admitted that on many ships crew members had free reign "to indulge their passions among [enslaved women] at pleasure, and sometimes were guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature."[151] Even young girls around Couvent's age could become the victims of rape and abuse. In 1777, the captain of the French ship the *Aimable Française* reported rapes committed by his Second Captain Philippe Liot. The report stated that after Liot "mistreated a very pretty Negress, broke two of her teeth, and put her in such a state of languish that she could only be sold for a very low price at Saint Domingue where she died two weeks later" he "pushed his brutality to the point of violating a little Negro girl of eight to ten years, whose mouth he closed to prevent her from screaming. This he did on three nights and put her in a deathly state...This mistreatment and violence did so much damage to this Negro girl that she was sold in Saint Domingue for only 800 livres instead of the 1,800 livres she would have been worth."[152] Clearly the loss of profit motivated the *Aimable Française*'s captain to report Liot's crimes. Yet, a profound sense of trauma and the physical toll it took on the little girl can be read in the captain's description of "the mistreatment and violence" she endured.

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[150] Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 189-191; Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 241-243; Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 70; Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica,* 82-83. Diptee points out that although the evidence is difficult to uncover, the sexual exploitation of boys likely occurred on slave ships.

[151] Quoted in Harms, *The Diligent,* 313.

[152] Quoted in Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 101 and Harms, *The Diligent,* 312-313.

The sexual exploitation of women and girls was only one of many types of violence that transpired on a daily basis aboard the ship. Essentially a "portable prison," the environment required tight control, and the captain and crew believed incarceration, intimidation, and the use of weapons was necessary to do so. Keeping to a regular schedule also aided in maintaining order. The day to day routine onboard a slave ship consisted of meals twice a day, exercise, bathing, and sometimes cleaning. All of these activities were completed under close watch of the crew who kept guns trained on the captives. Any behavior construed as disobedience could be punished by the whip.[153]

Each morning the men were brought up from the hold to the main deck where they were inspected for disease and their chains checked for security. The women and children were also brought up from below, but on the quarterdeck separate from the men. Captives were allowed to go to the bathroom at this time and fed their first meal of the day. Breakfast and dinner usually consisted of a bland mixture of rice and beans. The captives were also allotted drinking water three times a day. After eating, the slaves bathed themselves, as cleanliness was considered the best defense against disease. If the weather was good, the captives were usually allowed to remain on the decks. If the weather was bad, however, captives stayed below for days or even weeks at a time. In the hopes of preserving the health of the enslaved men, women, and children onboard, the captain forced them to spend their afternoons dancing. Those individuals too sick or weak to participate or others who refused to do so were often beaten. These exercise sessions usually took place before and after the second meal, served in the late afternoon. In addition to exercise and fresh air, maintaining a clean ship served as another strategy for preventing the spread of diseases. On some ships, the slaves were required to clean out

[153] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* quote on 45, 216-218, 234, 239; Harms, *The Diligent,* 313.

the holds each day, while sailors undertook this job on other vessels. This chore involved dumping the tubs used for toilets and "perfuming" the stench of the hold with vinegar or tobacco smoke. After the evening meal, the enslaved passengers were returned to the holds for the night. The entire production would be repeated with little variation day in and day out, as the ship made its way across the open expanse of ocean.[154]

Violence infused the daily routine on the ship, but it was also committed in reaction to the active resistance of captives to their enslavement. Onboard rebellions remained a constant threat to the greatly outnumbered sailors, and frequently these threats became real, especially when the ship remained close to the African coast. Although most insurrections were thwarted or put down quickly, successful uprisings did occur.[155] Even quashed attempts at revolt did not always prevent captives from trying again. British slave trader Robert Norris recounted a voyage between Ouidah and Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century on which "the Slaves made an Insurrection" four separate times, despite harsh punishments to the men and women who participated and the eventual death of the leaders.[156]

Men were considered the most likely instigators of rebellions, hence the precautions taken such as chaining them together in the hold. However, women and children often played important roles in revolts. In fact, the more women there were onboard the ship, the more likely that an uprising would take place. The relative mobility of women and children allowed them to gather information about the workings of the

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[154] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 101-103; Harms, *The Diligent*, 308, 310-311, 313; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 235-239, 263-264.

[155] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 103; Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 72; Harms, *The Diligent*, 269; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 216-218, 234, 292-293; Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 3.

[156] Described and quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 32.

ship, pass messages between captives, procure weapons or tools, and aid with the planning of the attack. In the four attempted rebellions described by Robert Norris, women figured prominently among those involved.[157]

Like Norris, captains who experienced a slave insurrection on their ships hoped to prevent further incidents by meting out severe punishments. Norris first tried whipping the women that rose up against their captors, but after the fourth attempt at revolt, "[t]heir obstinacy put me under ye necessity of shooting ye Ringleader."[158] Punishments and deaths of rebellious captives usually involved torture and were performed in front of the other slaves so as to set an example. Commonly practiced torture methods utilized devices such as thumbscrews, whips, and "the tormentor," a fork that could be heated to sear the skin. When slaves were executed or died as a result of the captain's punishments, their bodies were often dismembered—a further way to terrorize the remaining captives into behaving.[159] One captain beheaded a slave who attempted an uprising and passed the head around, forcing the captives to kiss it and whipping them if they refused.[160]

The opportunity to rise up against the captain and crew may not have presented itself, but enslaved Africans found other ways to resist their enslavement during the Middle Passage. Self-destructive forms of resistance such as refusing to eat or take medicine and jumping overboard were common occurrences and clearly undermined the power structure of the ship. Suicide was a permanent way of ending one's enslavement, yet not all forms of self-injury had death as the goal. Collective hunger strikes could be

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[157] Taylor, *If We Must Die,* 88-93; Harms, *The Diligent*, 268; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 32.
[158] Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 32.
[159] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 72, 216-219.
[160] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 80.

used to protest mistreatment and often inspired further acts of rebellion.[161] Mass suicides could also serve as an alternative plan if an insurrection failed. Robert Norris explained that after their fourth attempt to revolt on his ship, the slaves "confessed their intentions and that ye women as well as ye men were determin'd if disapointed of cutting off ye whites, to jump over board but in case of being prevented by their Irons were resolved as their last attempt to burn the ship."[162]

Because such actions could prove disastrous to a slaving voyage, the crew remained on high alert to prevent the slaves' taking of their own lives. To keep individuals from jumping off the ship, sailors-turned-prison guards closely monitored the captives when on the main deck with weapons drawn. During mealtimes, those men, women, and children who refused to eat could be forced fed using the *speculum oris*, a metal instrument that pried the throat open and allowed food and water to be poured down it.[163] Yet, such violent means of saving lives to save profits often backfired. Dr. Aubrey, a slave-ship surgeon, believed these methods useless. When slaves commenced a hunger strike "all the Surgeon's Art will never keep them alive; they will never eat any thing by fair Means, or foul, because they choose rather to dye, than be ill treated."[164]

The idea that death could be preferable to the horrors of the slave ship contained, for many, a spiritual basis. Within West African cultures, there existed a widely held belief that in death an individual would return to his or her home.[165] This idea continued to be expressed among New World slave populations. In Haitian Vodou, for example, the souls of the deceased are believed to join their ancestors and the *lwa* in *Ginen* (Guinée,

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[161] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 284-289.
[162] Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 32.
[163] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 284-291.
[164] Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 287.
[165] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 301-303; Harms, *The Diligent,* 274.

Africa), described as an island located under the sea.[166] European slave traders observed and even discussed this belief with their captives. In an attempt to offset the power that this conviction could have for individuals to counter the trauma and displacement of enslavement, ship captains and slave owners, alike, mutilated the bodies of slaves who took their own lives. Dismemberment and beheading certainly terrorized the people forced to watch fellow passengers undergo such grisly practices, but whether or not enslaved Africans believed that this post-mortem treatment of the body affected its return "to their own Country" remains unclear.[167]

Captives forged relationships amongst themselves onboard the ship through similar beliefs about death, working together to plot an insurrection, or collectively refusing to eat. This does not mean, of course, that all individuals immediately or naturally identified with one another. Cultural and language differences, as well as reactions to the situation in which captives were placed certainly led to hostilities between individuals and groups. Despite divisions and overly stressful circumstances, the formation of personal relationships between captives occurred on the ship or even before boarding. Indeed, numerous participants in the slave trade observed the close bonds that enslaved Africans made with one another during the Middle Passage. In some instances, individuals discovered relatives or people they knew prior to enslavement on the ship. Other newly-made relationships extended beyond biological ties, "nation" identifications, and even shared languages. With their new companions, captives could commiserate, discuss the situation to better understand their circumstances, and remember their homes through stories and songs. The bonds between "shipmates" or "*bâtiments*," as they were

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[166] Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (New York: Dell, 1972), 36.

[167] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 302-303, quote on 303; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 134-135.

known in the French-speaking Atlantic proved critical to surviving the transatlantic voyage.[168]

New relationships made on the ship were the first of many "flexible, dynamic" social connections that Africans formed "to replace the ties disrupted by their enslavement."[169] This was true for the Bight of Benin region from which Marie Couvent was embarked and for many, if not most, West African societies. (Re)creating connections was crucial because a sense of belonging to a family, lineage, or kinship group determined an individual's social identity and how one understood his or her place in the world. Associations among people and the incorporation of dependents into a household or kin group raised an individual's social standing, influence, and wealth, while offering him or her protection.[170] As James Sweet notes, among Gbe-speaking groups, "a premium was placed on enlarging the kinship unit—through polygynous marriages, childbirth, adoption, and even the enslavement of outsiders."[171] Enslavement, however, ripped individuals from their kin and the social contexts from which they derived their identities. Orlando Patterson referred to this alienation as "social death" because slaves, as commodities, ceased to have social value or personal identities. Yet, the individuals sold and packed onto slave ships challenged this definition of themselves as mere things to be sold, exchangeable bodies whose value laid solely in their labor. Seeking new identities through social ties and personal relationships with shipmates, African captives fought against the threat of social death.[172]

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[168] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 271-272, 282-284, 304-306.
[169] Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 87.
[170] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 33; Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 88.
[171] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 33.
[172] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 33; Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1233, 1240-1241; Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 83. For more on social death see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery*

At Marie Couvent's young age, it is likely that an adult woman or older girl took care of her on the ship. It is possible that she made friends with other children onboard as well. If Couvent and her *bâtiments* were sold together or remained in close proximity to one another in Saint-Domingue, their relationships may have lasted many years. Unfortunately, many individuals lost contact with their close associates once sold in the Americas.[173] An early nineteenth-century newspaper article described an all-too-common scene after the landing of a slave ship in Charleston. The individual sale of three young girls "of the same country" forced the friends to part. Distraught by their separation, the girls "threw themselves into each others arms, and burst into the most piteous exclamations.—They hung together and sobbed and screamed and bathed each other with their tears."[174] For children, the separation from companions or caregivers at the point of sale could create feelings of abandonment and increased fear of an unknown future beyond the ship.

Bight of Benin to Saint-Domingue

Although we do not know the specific vessel or voyage that carried Marie Couvent to Saint-Domingue, the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* provides a clear statistical picture of the slave trade between the Slave Coast and Saint-Domingue during the time of her enslavement. A total of 118 voyages embarked 43,415 men, women, and children between 1750 and 1770—about one-fifth of the overall number of captives

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and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery,* 59-60. As Brown points out in his essay, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," Patterson's conception of social death in his comparative study of slave societies across time and space is "a theoretical abstraction that is meant not to describe the lived experiences of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence of slavery in an ideal-type slave, shorn of meaningful heritage." Brown, "Social Death and Political Life," 1233.

[173] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 306; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares,* 34; Palmer, "The Middle Passage," 75.

[174] Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 307.

shipped from the Bight of Benin and almost 23.5 percent of the total number of captives carried to Saint-Domingue during this period.[175] Due to France's injunction against foreign trade in its colonial possessions, known as the *exclusif*, all but one of the ships that made these 118 voyages between the Slave Coast and Saint-Domingue was French. However, a robust "interloping" trade existed in Saint-Domingue whereby other nations and smugglers provided colonists with lower-priced slaves and supplemented the French supply that fell short of planter demand, particularly in the South Department.[176] Thus, Marie Couvent could have arrived in Saint-Domingue onboard a non-French vessel or might have been initially imported to another Caribbean colony and then re-exported to Saint-Domingue. However, the likeliest scenario is that a French vessel carried Couvent directly from the Bight of Benin to Saint-Domingue.

If indeed she arrived on a French ship, the slaving expedition undertaken by the *Sauveur* between 1763 and 1765 suggests one possible voyage. Captained by Barthélemy Trabaud, the *Sauveur* left Saint-Malo, France on July 6, 1763 and sailed to the Bight of Benin coast. With French trade suspended during the Seven Year's War, the *Sauveur*'s voyage was one of eight trips made between the Bight of Bight and Saint-Domingue immediately following the end of the conflict. Twenty-nine crew members accompanied

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[175] TSTD, accessed March 18, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom =1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400; http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500; http://slavevoyages.org/tast /database/search.faces ?yearFrom=1750&To=1770&mjslptimp=36400. I have provided the figures for 1750-1770 as a generous period of time in which Couvent was shipped to Saint-Domingue.

In total, 644 voyages left with 212,718 enslaved individuals from the Bight of Benin between 1750 and 1770. The 118 voyages to Saint-Domingue made up slightly less than one-fifth of the overall number of shipments and the number of slaves embarked on these ships constituted a little more than twenty percent of the grand total from the Slave Coast over these two decades. Meanwhile, 552 voyages destined for Saint-Domingue left West and Central Africa with 184,999 enslaved people.

[176] TSTD, accessed March 18, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom =1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400; Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 24-25; David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 58, no.1 (Jan. 2001), quote on 126; Stein, *The French Slave Trade*, 5-6, 34.

Trabaud aboard the 254-ton vessel. Three months later the ship landed at Ouidah and Captain Trabaud began the trading process on October 21, 1763. Trabaud eventually filled his vessel with 190 enslaved individuals. This number of captives fell far below the average number of 368 people embarked on voyages during this period, although the size of the *Sauveur* was only slightly smaller than the average 287-ton ship.[177]

Before heading across the Atlantic, the *Sauveur* stopped at the island of São Tomé in the Bight of Biafra. The Portuguese-controlled islands of São Tomé and Príncipe frequently served as layovers for ships leaving the Gold and Slave Coasts. The *Sauveur* likely landed at São Tomé before starting the transatlantic. Ships usually remained on the islands for several weeks amassing large amounts of fresh water and foodstuffs. During this time, the ship was unloaded to be cleaned. Sick sailors and slaves could rest and recover during the layover. Trabaud probably rented a warehouse with a fenced enclosure to contain the enslaved men, women, and children, keeping the sexes separated. The goal was to "refresh" the slaves with exercise, fresh air, and daily baths. Trabaud also took the opportunity to purchase two additional slaves while on São Tomé. Once the necessary provisions had been collected and the captives' health improved, the *Sauveur* left out for Saint-Domingue on January 25, 1764.[178]

The remainder of the trip between São Tomé and Saint-Domingue took 108 days. When the *Sauveur* landed in Cap Français on May 12, 1764, it only carried 148 enslaved men, women, and children to be sold to the city's residents and nearby planters. Trabaud

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[177] TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces ?yearFrom =1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400. The comparative averages given are for French vessels sailing from the Bight of Benin to Saint-Domingue between 1750 and 1770. For more on the effect of the Seven Years' War on the French slave trade see Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 31-34.

[178] TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces ?yearFrom =1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400; Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 95-96; Harms, *The Diligent,* 278-280. The date of January 25, 1764 is given in the TSTD as the "date vessel departed Africa" so it is unclear if that refers to Ouidah or São Tomé.

had lost six crew members and forty-two slaves over the course of the 311-day voyage from France to the Caribbean via Africa. Despite a shorter than average middle passage and a stop at São Tomé, 22.1 percent of the total number of enslaved Africans perished aboard the ship. The loss of life among the captives on the *Sauveur* was much higher than the average thirteen percent of slaves that died on voyages from the Bight of Benin to Saint-Domingue between 1750 and 1770. Yet, even a thirteen percent average mortality rate meant that over 6,000 people died during the 118 voyages from the Slave Coast to Saint-Domingue over that twenty-year period.[179]

As the *Sauveur* drew closer to its final destination, the crew began to prepare the captives for sale. Trabaud would have wanted to present the slaves as young and healthy in order to entice buyers and complete the sale as quickly as possible. The *Sauveur* may have stopped briefly at Martinique in order to replenish its supplies, particularly fresh water and fruit. The sailors released the men from their chains in order for the abrasions left by the manacles to heal. They also shaved the men's heads and beards and attempted to hide any gray hairs. All of the captives were thoroughly bathed and their skin was rubbed with palm oil to make their physical appearance attractive and to mask the marks of illness.[180] Emma Christopher argues that sailors on slave ships performed "the final acts of commoditization" of African captives by washing, refreshing, and otherwise readying them to be sold to New World buyers.[181]

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[179] TSTD, accessed March 12, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast /database /search.faces ?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1770&mjbyptimp=60500&mjslptimp=36400. The total number of deaths and subsequent mortality rate given in the database do not seem to count the additional two slaves purchased in São Tomé. The length of the Middle Passage for voyages between the Bight of Benin and Saint-Domingue in the 1750 to 1770 period averaged 125 days.

[180] Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 239; Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 107; Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors,* 198-199.

[181] Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors,* 200.

When the *Sauveur* arrived in the busy harbor of Cap Français, it initially was required to anchor away from other ships in quarantine to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.[182] Before Trabaud could begin selling his "cargo," he had to receive permission to trade from colonial government officials, which included the purchase of a certificate of health and registering the total number of slaves onboard. Commonly, the certification process involved bribes which captains could be forced to pay in money or slaves.[183] Once permission to trade was granted, Trabaud hired an agent to aid him with the sale. These local merchants knew the market and, perhaps more importantly, had knowledge of buyers' credit situations. Specie was scarce in Saint-Domingue, and therefore, almost all slave purchases were made through a down payment of colonial goods accompanied by notes indicating future payments in installments. The agent earned his commission by advertising the sale to potential buyers and guiding the captain in his negotiations of prices and terms with the purchasers.[184]

Most sales took place onboard the ship. Potential buyers had to be rowed out to the vessel, anchored a good distance from the shore, to examine the slaves. The captives' bodies were closely inspected for health, age, and productive and reproductive capacity, just as they had been by the surgeon and captain in Ouidah. With the help of the agent, the captain sought to make advantageous yet quick deals with the buyers. The longer the enslaved men, women, and children remained on the boat, the weaker they became and the greater their risk of death. If the captain could not sell all of the slaves in a timely

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[182] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 109; Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti,* ed. and trans., Ivor D. Spencer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 95-96. This precaution had its merits. In 1772 a smallpox epidemic struck Cap Français when a slave ship arrived with numerous infected people. The ship sunk in the harbor and the captives spread the disease when making their escape. According to Moreau de Saint-Méry, 1200 people died. See Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished,* 156.

[183] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 109-110; Harms, *The Diligent,* 334-335.

[184] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 110-114.

manner aboard the ship, he was forced to relocate them to a rented warehouse in the center of town.[185] Captain Mary of the *Diligent* learned this lesson the hard way. Demanding prices too high for his Martiniquan buyers in 1732, Mary placed his slaves in a warehouse where they languished in crowded conditions for over a month. Dysentery broke out among the captives and several people died. Sensing Mary's desperation to make a sale, a local businessman proposed to purchase the remaining people for a low price and extended repayment terms. Mary accepted the offer and with diminished profits he began to ready his ship and crew for the return trip to France.[186]

Buyers usually purchased slaves on the ship individually or in small groups. In Cap Français large merchant houses bought the majority of African captives from the ships and then resold them to individual purchasers. When the terms of the sale had been agreed upon the purchased slaves left the ship with their new owners. The location and circumstances in which each newly-arrived African was placed depended on who bought him or her. Most slaves went to labor on sugar or coffee plantations, but plenty of slaves wound up in small towns or larger urban centers, like Cap Français.[187]

Most captives had been bought and sold more than once before arriving in Saint-Domingue, and for many, their purchase off the ship would not be their last. However, this moment was highly distressing. Recently-landed men, women, and children were

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[185] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 112; Harms, *The Diligent,* 338; Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished,* 245. Moreau de Saint-Méry described the creation of the Maison de Santé in 1782 as a place where "slaves from diseased cargoes" were housed outside of Le Cap. Prior to the Maison de Santé's creation, ill slaves abandoned by slave ships were "[c]onfined to warehouses in the center of the city, where the air was not suitable for restoring them, places which were all too often the scenes of cruel epidemics..." Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished,* 245-246.

[186] Harms, *The Diligent,* 338-339; 347-349.

[187] Stein, *The French Slave Trade,* 113; Harms, *The Diligent,* 337; Robert Louis Stein, *The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 34; Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 102, 116.

weak and exhausted from the transatlantic trip and many were ill as well. Once again friends, family, and shipmates were separated from one another. The transition from life as a captive on the ship to that of a slave in Saint-Domingue was filled with many frightening unknowns in a strange and deadly environment.

Surviving her forced migration across the Atlantic was only one of many hardships Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent would face as an enslaved African growing up in Saint-Domingue. The manner in which she navigated the transition to life in the colony depended as much on the social and cultural knowledge she brought with her as it did the conditions under which she found herself there. At her young age, Couvent's understanding of her enslavement would have been more limited than that of an adult, but she would have still retained memories of her home and family and ideas about slavery based on the social environment from which she came.[188] Most likely that social environment was an unstable one due to the recent history of turmoil throughout the Bight of Benin region. At the same time, Couvent's youth may have been an advantage to her, in so far as it allowed her to adapt more quickly to a cultural and social landscape that was in many ways far different from her own.[189] Gender also played an important role in how she understood her enslavement, and it would continue to shape her experience in Saint-Domingue. As she negotiated her new life as property, Marie Couvent engaged in "strategies of association," forming connections with various individuals she encountered on the island. If the structure of slavery disrupted many of these social bonds, Couvent formed a few relationships in Saint-Domingue that

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[188] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 90-91, 105; Lovejoy and Trotman, "Enslaved Africans and their Expectations of Slave Life in the Americas," 70-71.

[189] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 104-105; Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 88, 89, 102.

ultimately endured—beyond her enslavement and even beyond the existence of the colony itself.[190]

[190] Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," quote on 95, 109.

CHAPTER TWO
Life as Property in Colonial Saint-Domingue

I have never been married. I have a natural child named Celestin Moreau, mulatto, about thirty years old, slave of Mr. François Moreau.
- Testament of Marie Justine Sirnir, October 26, 1812

Not long after the slave ship that carried her from the Bight of Benin landed in the harbor of Cap Français, a young girl was sold. She was tired and frightened, malnourished, and possibly ill. The core elements that made up her identity—her name, her family, the place she called home—had all but disappeared. She held them in her memory, certainly, but these things were denied her under the regime of slavery that permeated every aspect of colonial Saint-Domingue society. This little girl, whose original names were not recorded, became the woman known as Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent. She eventually gained her freedom, although whether this occurred before the Haitian Revolution is unclear. Couvent spent close to forty years in the French Caribbean colony. She remained enslaved for at least eighteen of those years and perhaps upwards of three decades.

Only a few details of her life as a slave in Saint-Domingue have been recovered, but evidence suggests that she disembarked in the city of Cap Français where she would have been bought from the ship's captain and put to work. Most enslaved Africans were purchased to labor on plantations, and this very well may have been Couvent's fate, too. Based on the available information, however, a more likely scenario would be that she was bought by a resident of Le Cap and that is where she remained during her time in the colony. Whether she experienced slavery on a sugar plantation in the rich northern plain that flanked Le Cap, on a newly developed coffee plantation in the mountains surrounding the plain, or within a household in Saint-Domingue's largest city, Couvent

existed as "a person with a price."[1] She was exploited for her productive and reproductive abilities with little recourse against overwork and abuse.

This chapter examines Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's life growing up enslaved, gaining her freedom, and surviving the revolution that culminated in the creation of the independent nation of Haiti. Violent upheaval framed her time in Saint-Domingue. She arrived as a captive from the volatile Bight of Benin region still reeling from Dahomey's wars of conquest and departed at the end of a bloody, thirteen-year war that destroyed slavery, along with numerous lives and much of the island's infrastructure. For the forty or so years in between, Couvent lived in a slave society marked by its brutality and ever-increasing production of wealth. It was an exceedingly imbalanced society. Slaves vastly outnumbered the free population, which was itself divided between whites and free people of color. While held in bondage within this environment, Marie Justine formed relationships and developed skills that would aid her in New Orleans, while drawing on her earliest years in the Bight of Benin to adjust to life in the colony. To postulate an idea of what Couvent's life was like under slavery, I supplement primary sources from Saint-Domingue, including notary records, censuses, maps, and vital records with secondary sources on the colony. Building on the previous chapter, this chapter presents a framework to consider the impact that living as property in Saint-Domingue had on Couvent's later life as a property owner in New Orleans.

Although she never mentioned Saint-Domingue in her 1812 will, Marie Justine Sirnir did provide one significant clue about her enslavement there. She stated that she had "a natural child named Celestin Moreau, *mûlatre*, about thirty years old, slave of Mr.

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[1] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

François Moreau."[2] Couvent would have been about twenty-five years old when she had Celestin around 1782. That she described her son as "the slave of François Moreau" indicates that she, too, was enslaved when he was born. At the time of Celestin's birth, Maurau may have also owned Couvent or he could have purchased them together at a later date.[3] It is possible that François Maurau only owned Celestin, separating him from his mother by purchasing the child from Couvent's master. Either way, his ownership of Celestin directly connected François Maurau and Marie Justine Sirnir.

Indeed, much of what is known about Couvent's experience on the island involves the members of the Maurau family. François and his brother, Jean Maurau, were Frenchmen from Les Essards, a commune in what is today the Charente Department. Both men immigrated to Cap Français and married creole women in the city. François and his wife had at least two daughters in Le Cap, while Jean's marriage did not produce any children. François worked as a merchant tailor and owned several slaves, in addition to Celestin and possibly Couvent. Jean was also a merchant and perhaps worked with his brother in the tailoring business. As free white male property-owners, the Maurau brothers left some record of their residence in Cap Français. Marie Couvent's enslavement, however, severely limited the documentation of her time there. Yet, their lives and the fate of their families became intertwined in the French Caribbean colony. Forged under slavery, Marie Justine Sirnir's association with the Mauraus continued after she gained her freedom and beyond to her new life in New Orleans.

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[2] *Testament*, 1812.

[3] Although the spelling of "Moreau" is often rendered this way in notary records, both François and his brother Jean sign their name as "Maurau."

"*La Perle des Antilles*"

When Couvent arrived in Saint-Domingue circa 1764 the French colony had been established for about a century. In fact, 1664 marked the appointment of the first French governor to command the northern coast of the Spanish island of Hispaniola and nearby Tortuga.[4] Over the course of the next 100 years, the colony would grow immensely in population, reliance on slave labor, cash crop production, and wealth. Even more incredible growth was yet to come. In the last twenty-five years of its existence as a French colony Saint-Domingue reached its peak in production and profits, and Couvent witnessed both the tremendous boom and the bloody demise of "the pearl of the Antilles."[5]

Although Saint-Domingue was "one of the last colonies founded in the Americas," it was established on the western side of what became the first European colony in the New World—the island "discovered" by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and named for the Spanish crown for which he sailed.[6] The Spanish settled the eastern portion of the island, quickly decimating the indigenous Tainos who lived there, and importing African slaves to work sugar plantations. By the seventeenth century, however, Spanish colonial wealth and attention was focused elsewhere and the western end of the island remained unoccupied. Around this time, French settlers and pirates known as *flibustiers,* first inhabiting the small isle of Tortuga, began to settle on Hispaniola, commonly referred to as Santo Domingo after the name of its capital. There, the *flibustiers* joined with another group of settlers known as *boucaniers*, who hunted the

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[4] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 17.

[5] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 18-21; Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 240-241; Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 15.

[6] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 13, 15, quote on 18.

wild cattle and hogs brought to the island by the early Spanish colonists and sold the smoked meat to ships in the Caribbean. As the two groups mingled and became more established, they began to grow foodstuffs and tobacco. Following the appointment of the governor in 1664, French colonists arrived and started plantations. France received official possession of Saint-Domingue when the Spanish agreed to relinquish its claim to the western third of the island in the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick.[7]

The colony existed on a narrow, crescent-shaped piece of land, smaller than the size of Maryland, with two peninsulas that jut out to the northwest and southwest. Its peculiar shape and varied topography created three distinct regions—the North, West, and South. The entire area consists of high mountain ranges that cut across five plains and separate each region from the other. Some areas receive large amounts of annual rainfall, while other parts experience semi-arid conditions. Each region contained mountains, plains, and coastline with accessible ports. Because the heavily forested mountains made travel between regions difficult, they remained relatively isolated from one another. Most movement and communication between the North, West, and South occurred by boat rather than overland.[8]

The colonial administration divided Saint-Domingue into three main provinces that corresponded to these regional boundaries. A capital anchored each province which was further divided into *quartiers* and then again into parishes. Designated the colonial capital in 1751, Port-au-Prince was located in the West and also served as that province's

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[7] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 13-17; John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 23-25, 29.

[8] David Geggus, "The Major Port Towns of Saint Domingue in the Later Eighteenth Century" in *Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850*, eds. Franklin Knight and Peggy Liss (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 87; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 17-19, 21; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 26; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 23.

capital. The North's capital city was Cap Français (also known as Le Cap), a large port and urban center. The smaller town of Les Cayes operated as the provincial capital of the South.[9] Although linked by the French colonial government, in many ways the provinces developed into three distinct places, each with "its own landscape, customs, and demography."[10]

The North province contained the fertile *Plaine du Nord* that ran along the northern coast for over forty miles. The land between the mountains and the ocean was flat and received water from good rainfall and numerous streams. Situated on a large natural harbor in the center of the plain, Cap Français served as the economic, social, and cultural center of the province, and, arguably, for the colony as a whole. It operated as the commercial hub for the surrounding sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations. The port city also benefited from its accessibility for ships traveling to and from Europe and served as the base for the transshipment of goods and slaves to other parts of the colony. On the eve of the Revolution, the Northern province was the most densely settled and well-developed region in Saint-Domingue. The enslaved population outnumbered whites living there ten to one.[11]

The West was not quite as developed as its northern neighbor, but it did contain more people and was overall richer than the South. Gonaïves was the most northern port town in the region and was separated from St. Marc, another port located in the middle of the western coastline by the Artibonite plain. The capital, Port-au-Prince, was located in the southern part of the province, anchoring the Cul-de-Sac plain. Plantations developed

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[9] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 20; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 26; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 91, 106.

[10] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 28.

[11] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 24; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 21-23.

slower in the West because of the relative dryness of the two plains, as compared to the *Plaine du Nord*. The government financed slave-constructed irrigation systems in the mid-eighteenth century, making the soil much more conducive to growing sugar, indigo, and cotton. Further inland laid Mirebalais, a small and isolated parish, near the Spanish border. Although the land was rich and well-hydrated, Mirebalais was difficult to reach because of the mountains. It remained more of a frontier community in the 1780s and contained a large number of free people of color.[12]

The last of the three regions to be settled, the South province stretched along the bottom portion of the crescent, making a long, thin strip of land running westward. Mountains divided the South from the West and subdivided the southern province in half. On the eastern side, the town of Jacmel bordered the Caribbean Sea. Also a port on the Caribbean side, the capital of Les Cayes was located further west and adjacent to two plains. The town of Jerémie anchored an additional plain at the end of the southern peninsula but was situated on the gulf side. The South suffered from a lack of trade with French vessels, as its ports were more difficult to access than those in the North and West. In order to stay supplied, residents traded illegally with the nearby British and Spanish colonies. Overall, the southern province contained the least number of people and plantations, and its isolation produced a distinctive regional culture that hearkened back to the colony's *flibustier* and *boucanier* beginnings.[13]

By 1789, Saint-Domingue contained more than 7,000 plantations producing sugar, indigo, coffee, cotton, and cocoa. Its evolution from a frontier settlement of pirates and hunters to "one of the greatest wealth-producing colonies in the world" occurred

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[12] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 26-27; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 39-41.
[13] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 27-28; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 26, 28

rapidly after 1700 when the cultivation of sugar began on the *Plaine du Nord.*[14] Prior to that, the initial plantations in Saint-Domingue produced tobacco and utilized both enslaved Africans and indentured Europeans (*engagés*) to plant, harvest, and cure the crop. *Engagés* were contracted to work for a set amount of time, usually three years, after which they received their freedom and often began planting their own tobacco. By the mid-1680s, competition from tobacco-growers in Virginia forced planters in Saint-Domingue to turn to indigo. Indigo production required a more intensive process and more capital, which led to an increased reliance on slave labor. Whites, however, outnumbered enslaved Africans in 1687, and black and white laborers continued to work side by side on small indigo plantations until the early 1700s.[15]

The dawn of the eighteenth century saw the introduction of sugar production in Saint-Domingue. Compared to indigo or tobacco, growing and harvesting sugar cane and turning it into raw or refined sugar and by-products like rum and molasses took larger plots of fertile, well-irrigated land, a greater, more diversified labor force, and costly manufacturing equipment. To satisfy their highly intensive labor demands, plantation owners began to rely exclusively on enslaved Africans. The tremendous growth in the establishment of plantations and the importation of slaves following the institution of sugar production went hand in hand. In just the first four years of the eighteenth century, the number of plantations increased from eighteen to 120. By the 1750s there were 600 sugar plantations in Saint-Domingue. A total of 9,082 slaves lived and worked in the colony in 1700, but by mid-century this number had increased to almost 150,000 enslaved men, women, and children. Meanwhile, the number of white colonists had only

[14] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* quote on 22; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 22.
[15] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 18-19; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 15; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 22; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 25.

increased to 14,000 by that time. Thus, the sugar boom irrevocably changed the colony's economy and society over the course of the eighteenth century.[16]

In the 1760s planters began to grow coffee, which quickly proved to be another highly lucrative export crop. The size and type of land necessary for coffee cultivation made it easier to break into than sugar production. While sugar cane needed fertile plains and a ready source of water, coffee trees could grow in the high altitudes of the island's mountains. Colonists and their slaves moved into the mountainous regions, particularly in the West and South, and began to settle these less developed areas. On the eve of the Revolution, Saint-Domingue contained 2,500 coffee plantations.[17]

The rapid expansion of coffee plantations after 1763 occurred immediately following the end of the Seven Year's War and brought even greater economic prosperity and more people to the colony. French immigrants hoping to make their fortunes joined ever larger numbers of enslaved Africans forcibly transported to provide the labor on which the colony's great wealth rested. France, forced to cede Louisiana to Spain and New France to Great Britain, had lost its North American territories in order to retain its Caribbean possessions at the conclusion of the conflict. This funneled French migrants, mostly young men, to Saint-Domingue. The resumption of peace also ended the British blockades that prohibited French shipping to and from the Caribbean throughout the war. Denied imports for most of the conflict and requiring additional enslaved workers for the

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[16] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 18-19; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 22; Stein, *French Sugar Business*, 42, 60, 71-72; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 25.

[17] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 20-21; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 22; David Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, eds. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 73; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 26, 173-174; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 19.

development of coffee production, planters more than welcomed the surge in the French slave trade after the Seven Year's War.[18]

It is precisely at the onset of this increase in slave importation that Marie Couvent was forcibly transported to the colony. In 1762 no documented ship landed slaves in Saint-Domingue due to the British blockade. The following year, however, eight vessels disembarked 1,809 captive Africans in the colony. That number jumped to 12,732 people in 1764, the year Couvent presumably arrived. About fifty-five percent of these enslaved people were embarked from West Central Africa, but like Couvent, some 2,500 individuals came from the Bight of Benin that year. Between 1764 and 1778, a total of 221,351 people were carried to the colony on slave ships. (This figure does not include the 27,225 individuals who were embarked along the African coast and died before reaching the Caribbean.) After a brief decline in the latter years of the American Revolution, the importation of enslaved Africans soared again after 1783. Over the next eight years, another 227,213 captives were transported to Saint-Domingue. The yearly average during this period was almost 30,000 enslaved men, women, and children. The importation of slaves to the colony reached its all-time height in 1790 when almost 48,000 captives were loaded into ships bound for the colony. Just 41,248 of these enslaved Africans survived the voyage to disembark in Saint-Domingue, only a year before the outbreak of the largest successful slave insurrection in history.[19]

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[18] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 20-21; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 110-111, 118; Stein, *The French Sugar Business*, 21; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 22.

[19] TSTD, accessed June 4, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database /search.faces?yearFrom =1760&yearTo=1791&mjslptimp=36400; http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1763&yearTo=1763&mjslptimp=36400; http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom =1764&yearTo=1764&mjslptimp=36400. I have chosen to state the numbers of slaves that were disembarked rather than the totals for those embarked during this period. In other words, the figures are even higher when the number of people who died in transit are taken into account. Additionally, these numbers do not include the captives smuggled into Saint-Domingue through the contraband trade, as these

This dramatic increase in slave imports between the mid-1760s and 1790 not only doubled the total number of slaves on the island from about 250,000 to almost 500,000 but also heavily Africanized the colony's enslaved population. By the eve of the Haitian Revolution, an estimated two-thirds of enslaved individuals were born in Africa. This had as much to do with importation rates as it did the extremely brutal nature of slavery in Saint-Domingue. African-born slaves continued to outnumber creole slaves (those born in the colony) because the enslaved population never achieved a positive rate of natural increase. While the expansion in imports indicates the soaring height of agricultural production and its attendant profits during these three decades, it also suggests something more sinister. In the first three to eight years, an estimated fifty percent of newly-imported Africans died from overwork, malnutrition, violence, and disease. Meanwhile, the average lifespan of an enslaved adult from Africa was merely fifteen years. Planters found it more economical to work their slaves to death and purchase new ones than to adjust the work load and care to a level that would sustain the enslaved population. As Doris Garraway writes, "it was a genocidal state of affairs maintained by an astounding rate of slave consumption."[20]

Saint-Domingue had long been the primary destination of French slaving ships and received eighty percent of the total captives transported by the French over the course of its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. In slave ship, plantation, and notarial

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shipments were rarely recorded. According to Laurent Dubois, estimates of the total number of enslaved Africans brought to Saint-Domingue over the course of its colonial history range from 850,000 to one million. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 39.

[20] Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, quote on 240; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 25-27; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 40; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 33, 39; Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones of Saint Domingue and the Revolution of 1791-93," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 20, no. 2 (August 1999): 33; Geggus, "The French Slave Trade," 131; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds., David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 260.

records in Saint-Domingue, enslaved Africans are described by a vast array of "nations." The earliest captives arrived in the colony from Senegambia, but by the eighteenth century, the Bight of Benin constituted the main region of provenance. Over time the principal place from which French slavers acquired their human "cargoes" shifted southward to West Central African ports such as Cabinda and Malemba along the Loango Coast.[21]

This shift is reflected in the "ethnic" composition of Saint-Domingue's enslaved population. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century the presence of Gbe-speaking people, often labeled "Arada" in records, dominated the colony's slave force. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, Kongo speakers from the Bantulands in West Central Africa ("Congo" in colonial parlance) formed the clear majority of African-born people on the island. Over the course of the 1700s, about twenty-four percent of slaves imported to Saint-Domingue were embarked from the Bight of Benin while almost forty-two percent arrived from West Central Africa. The other thirty-five percent came from ports in Senegambia and Sierra Leone, along the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra, and even Mozambique.[22]

The society that developed amidst this explosive growth in slave importation and sugar and coffee cultivation was highly imbalanced and divided along lines of race, class, and status. As enslaved Africans replaced white *engagés* as the source of labor, the

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[21] Geggus, "The French Slave Trade," 125-126, 131-132; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 40; Hall, 152-153.

[22] Geggus, "The French Slave Trade," 131-132; Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones," 39; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 40; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 26; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 152-153. The percentages of captives from the main embarkation regions were derived from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which cites a total of 788,751 Africans imported to Saint-Domingue between 1700 and 1800. These figures do not include slaves sold illegally in the colony. TSTD, accessed June 5, 2013, http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1800&mjslptimp=36400.

number of black people increased drastically while the number of whites declined. As early as 1713, slaves made up eighty percent of the colony's total population, and this disparity only deepened over time. Despite the increased immigration from France after the Seven Year's War, white colonists in Saint-Domingue remained a small minority compared to the enslaved population. The estimated number of enslaved Africans and their descendants reached 465,000 in 1789, far outnumbering the 31,000 whites who lived there. The countryside saw the greatest disproportion of slaves to whites; whereas, twenty-six percent of the white population lived in urban centers, only four percent of the rural inhabitants were white. Legally, politically, and socially this diminutive number of whites held the reins of power, and an even smaller minority held the majority of the colony's wealth.[23]

Although the racialized power structure pitted whites and slaves against each other, both groups contained their own internal divisions. A shared subjection to slavery united Africans and their creole descendants in powerful ways, but cultural or "ethnic" distinctions, hierarchies within plantation work forces, and differing experiences of enslavement on sugar, coffee, or indigo plantations and in urban settings potentially cut through a people united by status and dark skin. Creole slaves, while a minority within the enslaved population, often had greater opportunities than African-born slaves, including more access to skilled jobs and management positions as well as a higher possibility of manumission.[24] This was due to slave owner attitudes such as that expressed by white creole commentator Moreau de Saint-Méry: "The creole slaves are

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[23] Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 30; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 19, 30; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* xvi.

[24] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation," 94; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 5-6, 41-42, 46-47; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 26-31, 39.

born with physical and moral qualities which give them a genuine right to superiority over those who were transported here from Africa."[25] The reality was that enslaved people native to the colony had certain advantages over those forced to migrate from their countries of birth, especially as adults. They grew up with the creole language and had family networks on which to rely. Yet, such divisions could and were often overcome, as enslaved men, women, and children struggled together to make lives for themselves under the brutal regime of slavery.[26]

Similar types of divisions existed among white colonists. Economic status, origins (French-born or creole), and political differences created conspicuous discords among whites. Planters and government officials were often at odds over the metropole's attempts to control the ways in which the colony functioned. Disagreement went all the way to the top of the administration. The colony was governed by the Intendant, responsible for domestic affairs, and the Governor-General, who controlled the military. The men serving in these positions often found their authority thwarted by the significant overlap in their powers and duties.[27] Conflicts amongst whites, particularly class distinctions, were not lost on the slaves, who gave their own names to the various segments of the white population. The wealthy plantation owners and members of the urban elite, including French government administrators were dubbed *grands blancs*. Those whites in the lower classes were known as *petits blancs*. The group included white men who managed plantations, professionals, merchants, and artisans as well as the

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[25] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished,* 49. Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry was a white creole from Martinique who was educated in France. Upon returning to the Caribbean, he worked as a judge in Saint-Domingue. He wrote extensively on the history, culture, and society of the colony as it existed in 1789. Fleeing the island during the Haitian Revolution, Moreau de Saint-Méry finished his tome, *Description Topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la Partie française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* in Philadelphia 1797.

[26] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 42.

[27] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 30; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 17.

rougher sort—"ex-sailors, ex-soldiers, servants, petty criminals."[28] Over time a shared sense of whiteness did develop in Saint-Domingue, yet this never fully erased the deep class divisions among white colonists. Many a Frenchman arrived in the colony with dreams of becoming a *grand blanc,* but these *mouton France* (French sheep), as the slaves referred to recently arrived immigrants, more often remained frustrated "little whites" instead.[29]

In addition to whites and slaves, a third social group existed in Saint-Domingue. Known collectively as *gens de couleur libres* or free people of color, the population originated in the sexual economy of racial slavery that allowed white men access to enslaved women. Such relationships, often forced, could lead to freedom for the enslaved partners and their children. Over time the number of free people of color grew through various means, including natural increase. In ports like Cap Français and Port-au-Prince, enslaved women, in particular, found the means to purchase their freedom. Women described as "black," rather than of mixed race made up the majority of the *gens de couleur libres* population in these cities on the eve of the Haitian Revolution. While emancipations favored women and children, opportunities like militia service provided avenues of freedom to enslaved men. Interracial relationships also persisted, particularly among free women of color from well-established families and newly-arrived European

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[28] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 35; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 16-17; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* quote on 118.

[29] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 20, 35; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 17-18; Garrigus argues that a "new ideology of 'whiteness' " emerged in Saint-Domingue in the post-Seven Years' War period in which "virtue and full colonial citizenship" were defined as "white." This racialized ideological development involved increased discrimination and legal restrictions against free people of color as well as discourses that effeminized free men of color and hypersexualized free women of color. Set up in opposition to people of African descent, this ideology united newly-arrived French immigrants and white creole colonists across class lines. Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 143, 149, 162, 170.

men, who gained upward mobility through such arrangements.[30] Although deemed illicit, these relationships were never prohibited. Rather white elites in Saint-Domingue used legal and narrative discourses to create what Doris Garraway calls "the libertine colony": a "[s]ystem of miscegenation, desire, and exclusion that both sanctioned white colonial desire and enacted social barriers to control its consequences."[31]

Free people of color lived in all three regions of the colony and played an important role in the economy. In both urban and rural areas, many free men and women of color owned land and slaves. Some reached the ranks of wealthy plantation owner, while others farmed small plots for subsistence. In the cities and towns, free people of color often gained success as skilled workers and business owners. Free men of color also played a critical role in the colony's defense, serving in the military and the rural police force (*maréchaussée*). The *gens de couleur libres* enjoyed many of the same rights and privileges as whites, although this was tempered by the racialized system of slavery on which Saint-Domingue society was built. As historian John Garrigus has shown, free people of color faced increased racial discrimination and legal restrictions beginning in the late 1760s in colonial authorities' attempts to curb their wealth and social advancement.[32]

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[30] Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,*202-204, 206, 208, 211, 235; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40, 56-57, 63-63, 178; King, *Blue Coat of Powdered Wig,* xvi, xxiii, 42-45, 54, 110-111, 181, 190-191; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 5-6; 61-64; 67-68; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 18-19; Dominque Rogers, "Les Libres de couleur dans les capitals de Saint-Domingue: Fortune, mentalités et integration à fin de l'Ancien Régime (1776-1789)," (Thèse de doctorat, Bordeaux II, 1999), 69-72.

[31] Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,*xiii, quote on 197.

[32] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 62-64, 70; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 19-20; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* vii, xii-xiv, xviii; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 162-163.

Although the exact size of this population is difficult to judge, it is estimated that at least 28,000 free people of color lived in Saint-Domingue in 1789.[33] Linked by their non-slave status, the colony's free people of African descent consisted of a highly diverse group of individuals. People classified this way included former slaves who gained their freedom (*affranchis*) and those whose families had been free for generations; men and women born in the colony and those born in Africa; and people of mixed racial ancestry as well as those of exclusively African descent. Such diversity inevitably led to complex and contradictory alliances and antagonisms both amongst each other as well as with whites and slaves.[34]

Life as Property

Eventually Marie Couvent gained her freedom, but when she first entered Saint-Domingue society as a little girl, she did so as a slave. Following her purchase from the ship, she became "of the Arada nation," she was given a new name in a language she did not speak, and she was once again branded. Masters immediately asserted their ownership of recently imported African captives (called *nouveaux negres et négresses* or *bossales*) by giving them new names.[35] These names ranged from classical figures (César) and places (Bordeaux) to the more informal (Printemps, spring) and even ironic

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[33] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 30. One reason that the numbers are difficult to pin down is the unreliability of colonial censuses, which often underreported the number of free people of color. This especially occurred in more remote areas that were difficult for officials to access. King, xvi, 42-43. Although the number of free people of African descent did increase naturally, there was a large jump in their numbers after the Seven Years' War when legal documents began describing individuals in more explicit racial terms. This increased the number of free people of color, particularly in the South, by virtue of describing individuals as "mulattoes" that were previously described as white (or not racially labeled at all). Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 11, 143-144; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 61.

[34] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 5-6, 64, 67; King, *Blue Coat and Powdered Wig*, xii-xiii, xviii-xxi; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 270; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 211.

[35] Susan Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français" in Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 290; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 165.

(Sans Souci, carefree).[36] One young "Arada" slave, a boy about eight or nine years old, was named "Quatre-cinq-francs [400 francs] or Gentilhomme [Gentleman]."[37] The juxtaposition of the boy's two names—one perhaps reflecting his value as piece of property, the other a social station he could never reach—was a cruel and obvious reminder of his chattel status. Yet, most names bestowed on enslaved Africans were common French names (Marie Jeanne, François, etc.).[38] Enslaved individuals continued to use their African names amongst themselves and these monikers sometimes showed up as "*dit/e*" names or nicknames (*dit/e* meaning "called").

In her 1812 will Couvent referred to herself as "Marie Justine Sirnir *dite* Esther."[39] Either of these first names could have been the one bestowed on her by her owner in Saint-Domingue. If Marie Justine was her slave name then Esther, her nickname or alias, could have been one that she chose for herself or gained in an informal manner. Nicknames were very common in Saint-Domingue, especially for people of African descent, and their usage likely derived from naming practices in West and Central African cultures. In many societies from which enslaved Africans in Saint-Domingue hailed, individuals accumulated names over a lifetime, given at birth and various other rites of passage, as well as those given less formally by friends or family.[40] Multiple

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[36] Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, "Maronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haiti)," online database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=42; http://www.marronnage.info /fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=2205; http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=105; http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=2460; hereafter, Marronnage database.

[37] Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info /f r /lire.php ?type=annonce&id=2038.

[38] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 165.

[39] *Testament*, 1812. She was not yet married to Bernard Couvent at that time.

[40] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 40; Jerome Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, "Slave Names and Naming in Barbados, 1650-1830," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Oct. 1996), 690.

The use of nicknames was also found in France and other French colonies. Shannon Dawdy argues that the use of *dit/e* names in French colonial Louisiana "could be a significant means of self-fashioning" and could derive from a various origins, including saint's names, place names, occupations, *noms de guerre*, and play-on words that described the individual's personality. Some were self-appointed

names, then, suggest a change in status or identity. One such transformation would have been Couvent's baptism, in which a new name, based on a saint, would have been chosen or bestowed on her.[41] If this was the case, then "Marie Justine" was likely her baptism name and "Esther" would have been the name given to her as a *une négresse nouvelle*.[42] When Couvent received her freedom she underwent another important change in her social identity. This occasion also deserved a new name, especially the addition of a surname.[43] The origin of the surname "Sirnir/Cirnaire" is still a mystery, but she may have adopted it from a former master, claimed it herself when she gained her freedom, or had it bestowed upon her at the time of her emancipation.[44]

After being purchased and (re)named, Marie Justine *dite* Esther was likely once again branded. In addition to imposing appellations on slaves, Saint-Domingue masters laid claim to their newly purchased property by "stamping" their own names or initials onto the bodies of enslaved Africans. Brands clearly identified the owner of the slave and made it difficult to hide if he or she escaped. Runaway slave advertisements indicated

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while others were bestowed by the associates of the person. See Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago,IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 164-166, quote on 165.

[41] Exactly when this occurred is unknown, as no baptism record has been located. Couvent served as godmother on multiple occasions in New Orleans, which required her to have been baptized. However, she may not have undergone this ceremony until she relocated to Louisiana.

[42] Scott and Hébrard found that in some documents Rosalie, a formerly enslaved Senegambian woman, was referred to as "Marie Françoise, dite Rosalie," which they assume to be a baptismal name. When Rosalie's daughter, Élisabeth, was baptized in 1799 in Les Abricots, she was given the nickname "Dieudonné." See Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 7, 40.

[43] Stewart King indicates that surnames in Saint-Domingue were "the privilege of the free, for the most part." He also found examples of newly freed individuals taking new names in Saint-Domingue. King, *Blue Coat and Powdered Wig*, quote on 165, 166. Gary Nash discusses the importance of self-renaming for freed African Americans in Early Republic Philadelphia: "Upon gaining freedom, Afro-Americans took complete possession of the naming process." Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 79-88, quote on 83.

[44] According to a 1773 law in Saint-Domingue, all emancipated slaves were to be given "African"-derived surnames, although historians Dominique Rogers and Stewart King point out that this regulation was not strictly followed. King, *Blue Coat and Powdered Wig*, 10, 166-168; Rogers, "On the Road to Citizenship: The Complex Route to Integration of the Free People of Color in the Two Capitals of Saint-Domingue," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. David Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 71-72. In her study of free women of color in Saint-Domingue notary records, Susan Socolow found numerous examples of former masters changing the names of freed slaves in the emancipation documents. See Socolow, "Economic Roles," 290.

these marks in their descriptions. The notification for a runaway named Catin said that he was five feet five inches tall and branded (*étampée*) "BLANCHARD."[45] Some brands included the location of the master's residence, like L'Eveillé, who was "branded MACÉ and below that AU CAP."[46] Slave owners preferred branding the breast, but multiple brands—one for each new owner—required additional space. Cupidon, an "Arada" slave was "freshly stamped" with "P. DUPUY" on his right breast below the previous brand, "P.P.X."[47] Not all slaves were branded, however. Numerous advertisements, such as the one for "a new negress of the Congo nation" described the absconded slave "without stamp."[48] Lacking these obvious indicators of enslavement enabled some individuals to pass as free. When Flore ran away on April 11, 1766, her master surmised that because she had not been branded she may be claiming to be free and perhaps also carrying fake freedom papers.[49] Some enslaved individuals resisted such marks of possession. An enslaved cook named L'Eveillé, taking advantage of his transfer from one master to another, ran away in 1771. The notification of his escape described his brand as originally reading "ALLAIN" but was now "illegible."[50] L'Eveillé may have known a natural remedy to heal scars or enlisted the help of someone who did.[51]

As a newly purchased slave, Marie Couvent would have been transported to the master's residence or plantation. She would have likely been placed in the care of an

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[45] Marronage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr /lire.php?type =annonce&id=2422; hereafter, Marronnage database.

[46]Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type =annonce&id=6.

[47] Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr /lire.php?type =annonce&id=2622.

[48] Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type =annonce&id=24.

[49] Marronnage database, accessed June 13, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type =annonce&id=9.

[50] Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type =annonce&id =2980.

[51] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 39.

adult slave, probably a woman.[52] Depending on the place and size of the workforce, this woman very well may have been "Arada" or at least spoke a similar Gbe language as Couvent. "Seasoned" slaves, those Africans that had lived in Saint-Domingue for a long time, "often played a pivotal role in mediating relations between" freshly imported Africans and their owners.[53] The mentoring that individuals who had experienced slavery on the island provided to those who had just landed was critical for the newly arrived to begin to adjust to their new situation. On a large plantation, where the chances of connecting with people of a similar background were greater, Couvent likely took comfort in being able communicate with fellow slaves as she learned the daily rhythms of life there. On smaller plantations, Couvent may have felt more isolated, although she surely sought out relationships with other slaves. This isolation could have been more pronounced in an urban residence, depending on the number of slaves in her owner's household. In the city, Couvent would likely develop associations with a broader spectrum of people, including her master, mistress, and other family members, as well as neighbors—both enslaved and free. In other words, the location and size of the place where Couvent lived as a slave in Saint-Domingue greatly affected her experience of slavery on the island. Therefore, a treatment of both plantation and urban slavery is necessary to fully understand her life as property.

Enslaved Lives in the *Plaine de Nord*

Organized around maximizing profits in the export trade, the plantation formed the basic unit of production in Saint-Domingue. Although their size and staple crop

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[52] Gwyn Campbell, "Children and Slavery in the New World: A Review," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 27, no.2 (August 2006): 272.

[53] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 109.

varied, *habitations*, as they were known in French, depended on the labor of an enslaved workforce to function. The vast majority of slaves in the colony lived, worked, and died on the thousands of plantations that filled the island's plains and mountainsides. Thus, the plantation was "the primary social unit" for hundreds of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children in Saint-Domingue. A number of structural factors such as the size and type of the plantation, the region in which it was located, and the kind of work assigned affected an individual's experience of slavery. Despite these differences, slaves on plantations throughout Saint-Domingue were subjected to arduous work for long hours, too little food and not enough rest, and unrestrained violence.[54]

The colony's sugar and coffee plantations were the top producers of these crops and together they employed much of the enslaved population. However, their organization, cultivation and production routines, and the size and makeup of their work forces differed substantially. Size ranged significantly among individual *habitations* and varied regionally as well. Typically, coffee plantations (*caféières*) were smaller than sugar plantations (*sucreries*), both in terms of acres and the number of slaves that lived and worked there. Saint-Domingue's sugar estates contained some of the largest work forces in the Americas, averaging 177 enslaved workers per plantation. In comparison, the average size of coffee plantation work forces was only thirty-three slaves.[55]

In addition to variations in work force size, the composition of the enslaved population on sugar and coffee estates also differed. When coffee plantations began to

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[54] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation," quote on 73, 74-76, 78, 94-95; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 27, 29, 33-34.

[55] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 74-76. According to David Geggus' calculations, about sixty-six percent of slaves on sugar plantations inhabited those that employed more than 170 laborers, and twenty-five percent lived on plantations of 300 slaves or more. Although much smaller, the enslaved work forces on coffee plantations varied greatly. Thirty-three percent of slaves lived on coffee plantations with over 100 workers and another thirty-three percent lived on estates with less than forty-five slaves.

spring up in the mountains in the latter part of the eighteenth century, sugar plantations, especially those in the northern plain, were long-established enterprises. For this reason, sugar plantations in the North were much more creolized than their coffee counterparts. The majority of enslaved individuals on sugar estates were born in Saint-Domingue, and in general, the *sucreries* had "relatively large, diverse [enslaved] communities several generations old."[56] The newer coffee plantations, on the other hand, contained more African-born individuals, most of whom were recent arrivals. Work forces on coffee plantations were also more "ethnically" concentrated; Kongos made up to two-thirds of these slaves. Although plantation slave populations reflected the rich variety of African social groups drawn into the transatlantic slave trade, clear distinctions existed between those in the plains and those in the mountains. David Geggus estimates that people from West Central Africa were twice as common on coffee estates while individuals shipped from the Bight of Benin were more frequently found on sugar plantations.[57]

The discrepancies in size and ethnic blend of the enslaved populations on coffee and sugar plantations created very "different social worlds" for the people who lived and toiled in the plains and mountains. The divergent geographical setting of these two types of plantations further affected the construction of these social environments. Travel through the mountains remained difficult, and the distance between coffee estates kept slaves much more isolated from one another than those on sugar plantations. Hindered in their ability to connect with others beyond their own plantation, this remoteness increased the amount of contact these slaves had with the estate's owner. With their later development, coffee plantations were overall more frontier-like in their orientation,

[56] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 78, quote on 94.
[57] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 80-81, 94.

especially in the West and South. The proprietors of coffee-cultivation lands more likely resided on the plantation and therefore had more direct contact with their comparatively smaller numbers of slaves. In contrast, the sheer size of the work force on sugar plantations limited interaction between masters and slaves. Additionally, the prevalence of absenteeism—in which proprietors lived in France and hired managers to run the plantation in their absence—found among sugar estates made such contact impossible. Enslaved men and women living in the heavily populated and well-developed plains, however, had greater opportunities for contact and socialization with slaves from different *habitations* as well as travel into towns for market days.[58]

By and large, the labor of cultivation and production structured the daily social interactions among slaves and between enslaved and free individuals. The types of tasks which enslaved laborers were forced to undertake varied significantly on sugar and coffee plantations. Much of this had to do with the planting and harvesting schedule of the two crops as well as the mechanics of sugar and coffee production. However, the basic division among field workers on both types of plantations was based on age, health, and strength. The majority of slaves were placed within several work gangs called *ateliers*. The main *atelier* consisted of the adult men and women in the best physical shape, as this group performed the most strenuous jobs—clearing the land and digging ditches, planting the coffee trees and sugar cane, and harvesting the crops. Children ages eight to thirteen and older adults joined by pregnant or nursing women, injured or disabled people, and freshly-imported Africans who needed time to recover from the transatlantic voyage made up the secondary *atelier*. Weaker than the members of the first group, these slaves

[58] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation," 78, quote on 94; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 32-33; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 37. The largest proportion of absentee owners held sugar plantations in the North. Dubois estimates that they made up a little less than half of the sugar estates in this region.

completed less physically demanding tasks such as tending the plantation gardens and farm animals, weeding the staple crops, or watching babies. Thus, youth did not spare slaves from labor, and some plantations employed those children younger than eight on a third gang to inculcate them into plantation life at an early age. The *ateliers* were overseen by a driver or *commandeur* who made sure the gangs worked consistently by monitoring their pace and production and maintaining order among the members.[59]

The amount of the work completed by slaves on a daily basis followed the seasons of planting, harvesting, and processing. Slaves performed difficult tasks for long hours on both coffee and sugar estates. Perhaps more flexible in its routine than that of sugar plantations, the operation of coffee estates was by no means easy on the enslaved workers. First, the mountainous terrain had to be cleared and the coffee trees planted. During the harvest, slaves picked the coffee beans during the day and then spent several hours at night cleaning and sorting them. Depending on where in Africa they lived before, the cooler climate of the mountains could be difficult to adjust to for the numerous newly-arrived slaves that populated coffee plantations. Yet, comparatively, the labor-intensive process of sugar production was more challenging and dangerous than that of coffee.[60]

The production of sugar required both demanding physical labor and meticulous attention to detail. Sugar cane took between twelve and eighteen months to grow, and more than half of each year was spent harvesting and grinding the stalks. During the

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[59] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 27-30; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 36, 45; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84; Campbell, "Children and Slavery in the New World," 265.

[60] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 29-30; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 46-47; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84, 90. According to Geggus, Kongos were healthier than other African-born groups in the mountains. He suggests this is because they were used to living in higher altitudes than those slaves that came from "low-lying hinterland of the Guinea Coast."

harvesting season, which ran from December to July, sugar plantation slaves worked practically around the clock. Because the sugar had to be processed immediately after the stalks were cut, the grinding took place at night. During the day, both men and women cut the sugar cane with large machetes. The stalks were then run through a mill to squeeze the juice out, a hazardous job usually performed by women. Divided into shifts, these slaves fed the mills either before or after a full day of cutting cane. It was easy to get caught in the mill working as quickly as possible on little sleep. If this occurred, the person could be maimed or even killed.[61]

To turn the juice into sugar it then had to be boiled, filtered, and crystalized. As the cane was pressed, slaves from the second *atelier* gathered the spent stalks which were used to fuel the boilers. The removed juice was then processed through a succession of large boiling tubs. A detail of specially-trained slaves operated the boilers by tending to the fires and overseeing the hot liquid as it was filtered and then allowed to crystalize into raw sugar. From there it could be refined from *muscavado* (raw, brown sugar) to *sucre terré* (refined, white sugar) or it remained raw and was packed in barrels. Every sugar plantation had a *maître-sucrier*, an expert in sugar production who supervised the entire sugar processing operation. Often this was a paid position held by a white man. Some plantations, however, employed enslaved men as master sugarmakers.[62]

Grounded in agricultural production yet functioning much like a factory, sugar plantations were industrialized operations with their water-powered mills in the North,

[61] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 45; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 28-29.

[62] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 29; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 45; Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones," 33-34.

irrigation systems in the West, and highly diversified labor forces.[63] In addition to the numerous field workers and those slaves on the second *atelier*, sugar estate work forces contained a variety of specialized positions. David Geggus estimates that sugar plantations employed a total of one-fifth of their slaves in activities outside of fieldwork. Indeed, *sucreries*, particularly the large estates, were self-contained and sufficient sites with infirmaries to care for sick slaves, gardens and animal husbandry to feed the plantation, horses and mules for transportation, and the planter's household. Enslaved men, women, and children were employed in all of these areas and the variety of jobs allowed for some social mobility among the slaves on a given plantation. Coffee plantations had positions outside of fieldwork, too, but the opportunities were less extensive because of their smaller size and simpler operations.[64]

The occupations open to slaves on plantations formed a clear hierarchy within the work force. The most important job was that of the *commandeur*, who "oversaw the daily work in the fields, made sure the other slaves were fed and taken care of, and punished those who failed in their duties." With strong leadership and communication skills, the men who worked as drivers maintained a delicate balance between the master and white overseer to whom they reported and the mass of slaves underneath their command. They served in this position of power wielding the whip but also with the respect of their fellow slaves. With their connections and skill set, it is perhaps unsurprising that *commandeurs* made up a majority of leaders in the 1791 slave insurrection in the North that set in motion the Revolution.[65]

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[63] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 19; Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones," 36; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84.
[64] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84.
[65] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, quote on 36, 37-38; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 30.

The drivers were followed in the hierarchy by other skilled positions such as the sugarboilers, coopers, coachmen and carters, midwives, and domestic slaves who cooked, cleaned, and served in the master's household. Enslaved people who filled these roles were usually better fed and clothed. Particularly if they worked in the household, they often had more contact with their masters and members of the master's family. Slaves serving in specialized jobs also had greater chances at being emancipated. On the bottom rung of the slave work force, rested the field hands, whose work was more physically demanding and monotonous. Some enslaved men and women toiled their whole lives in the cane and coffee fields. [66]

The choices made about who worked in the fields and who performed non-cultivation-related tasks demonstrated clear preferences along lines of sex and place of birth. Men far outnumbered women in occupations outside of the field, and creoles were more often chosen for specialized positions, including that of *commandeur* than African-born slaves. Thus, women and Africans made up the majority of field workers. On sugar plantations in the northern plain, roughly two-thirds of these slaves were women. Geggus explains that "in a typical gang of seventy field slaves, one-half were Africans, equally divided between males and females, about ten were creole men, and more than one-third young creole women."[67]

Occupational diversity and uneven access to privileged positions may have created divisions among the enslaved inhabitants of a plantation, but the constant threat and common employment of violence against them by the master, manager (*gérant*), and

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[66] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 46; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 30-31; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84, 88.

[67] Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," 84, 86, quote on 88; Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones," 37.

overseer (*économe*) was something they all shared.[68] Determined to wrest the maximum exertion from their enslaved labor source in order to attain the largest possible profits, planters drove slaves relentlessly. Sustaining this incredible pace of production required compliance on the part of enslaved people. Compliance, however, did not come readily. Masters frequently, unhesitatingly, and often enthusiastically utilized violence and terror to impose submission from enslaved men, women, and children.[69] In addition to enforcing a strict work regime, physical as well as sexual violence was deployed to punish disobedience. Any behavior that undermined the master or manager's authority constituted a punishable offense. Quite often these punishments were administered in front of other slaves in order to serve as an example. Thus, psychological abuse accompanied the physical as a way to maintain order on the plantation.[70]

The main tool of violence was the whip. On some estates slaves awoke to the crack of the whip and were prodded to and from the field by it as well. The most common form of discipline was whipping, and in another instance of emotional manipulation, the *commandeur* often had to perform this brutal task. The number of lashes dispensed in a given whipping was solely at the master's discretion. The set of laws that governed the institution of slavery in the French colonies, known as the Code Noir, placed no

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[68] Plantation owners of multiple estates and especially absentee owners hired managers to run the daily operations in their absence. Both white and free men of color filled these positions, and they had little oversight, particularly when the owner lived in France. Many managers took advantage of this situation to increase his own profits and standing in the colony, always at the expense of the slaves he managed, whom he did not own but whose work load, food rations, and overall treatment he controlled. On large plantations, owners in residence often hired an overseer "to monitor the slaves in the fields and track their sicknesses, deaths, and infrequent births." The men working as overseers were poor whites with little hope of advancing beyond this position. Dubois, 36, quote on 37.

[69] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 34, 36.

[70] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 34; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 50.

restrictions on the use of the whip against disobedient slaves when it was first instituted in 1685.[71]

The Code Noir did place limits on more extreme forms of corporeal punishment, but these restrictions on slave owners' authority were rarely heeded. Masters and managers committed all manner of sadistic and painful, even deadly, acts of violence against their slaves. Wounds created by beatings and lashings were "cleaned" with citrus juice, salt, or hot peppers. Parts of the body were mutilated—ears nailed to trees, genitalia burned or removed, legs cut off to prevent running away. People were locked in barrels, hung on hooks, and burned at the stake. The laws against torture, mutilation, and murder were seldom enforced and the individuals who committed these acts most often did so with impunity.[72]

Indeed, violence underwrote the system of slavery in Saint-Domingue. In this highly imbalanced power relationship a slave's legal standing as a piece of property granted the owner almost absolute authority over this person (and what limits the state did place on masters were often ignored). Slaves, however, were also humans and therefore did not willingly accept the master's authority. If it took violence to enslave

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[71] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 31, 34; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 36, 50; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 244. The Code Noir was reformed in the 1780s when French officials became "[a]larmed by the rising cost of slaves, high rates of mortality, low fertility, and the philosophical offensive against colonial slavery." One of these reforms limited the number of lashes a slave could receive to 50. Quote in Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 244.

[72] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 34-35; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 50; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 244. One the most infamous cases of master brutality against slaves occurred in 1788 immediately following a series of reforms to the Code Noir aimed at curbing wanton violence. One of these reforms allowed slaves to file complaints of such abuse against their master with the court. Following the murder and torture of several people on a coffee plantation owned by Nicholas Lejeune, fourteen slaves testified against their master. Colonial officials found two of the torture victims barely alive with their burned and decomposing feet still in chains on the plantation. These women died shortly after. Despite the clear evidence against him, Lejeune was acquitted with the full support of white colonists behind the court's decision. Not only did this verdict uphold the master's authority to treat his human property however he saw fit, it illustrated owners' fear of the slaves' power that could be unleashed if allowed to challenge that authority. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 37-38; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 244-245; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 56.

individuals on the African coast, it certainly took violence to uphold the dominance of masters over these people-turned-property once on the island. The constant need to violently enforce submission was exacerbated by the great disparity in the colony's demographics, in which slave owners were vastly outnumbered by those enslaved. When it came to the discipline of their slaves the extreme lengths to which Saint-Domingue masters resorted indicates both the horrible effects of unchecked power and the incredible fear of being a tiny minority among a mass of overworked, poorly fed, and cruelly mistreated people.[73]

Enslaved men, women, and children suffered inhumane treatment at the hands of masters, managers, and overseers. Yet, they regularly challenged their enslaved condition, which attempted to deny their humanity both in law and in practice. Undertaken by individuals and in groups, resistance to slavery occurred in a variety of forms and was often dictated by sheer survival. For example, slaves fought against hunger and malnourishment by stealing chickens from the coop or food from the kitchen. They slowed down their work in the fields when pushed too hard or even orchestrated a complete work stoppage to protest the treatment of a manager or overseer. Other acts of resistance matched the violence of slavery. Some individuals committed suicide, pregnant women and midwives induced abortions or killed newborns, and others fought and even killed their masters. Although the latter type of overt homicidal aggression was rare,

[73] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 34, 36, 39; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 50; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 240, 244.

enslaved individuals were clearly willing to risk their lives to counter the dehumanizing effects of slavery.[74]

Slaves utilized poisoning, however, as a potentially lethal, yet more covert form of resistance. Religious leaders, herbalists, and healers arrived in the colony from Africa with the knowledge of plant-based medicines as well as poisons. In Saint-Domingue, these individuals often worked in the plantation hospital or continued their spiritual healing and divination practices for their fellow slaves. Enslaved women staffed the plantation hospitals as *hospitalières* (hospital managers), *infirmières* (nurses/assistants), and *accoucheuses* (midwives) where they provided medical care using both African- and European-derived medicines and traditions. The women serving in these prestigious positions, particularly that of *hospitalière,* were among the most powerful and highly respected women within the slave community. Enslaved men and women who worked as healers and spiritual leaders did so outside of any master-authorized capacity, but they held powerful leadership roles among slaves. Members of both of these groups had the skills and necessary materials to perform what Karol Weaver refers to as "occupational sabotage." They could and often did administer poisons to animals, masters and their families, and other slaves to cause illness and death. Indeed, the threat of poison instilled a widespread fear among slave owners, as it could be delivered and ingested without detection. Slaves with knowledge of or access to poisons possessed a potent tool of resistance.[75]

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[74] Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,* 242, 245; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 47, 48, 53; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 33, 39, 46-49; Karol Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4, 60.

[75] Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries,* 2-4, quote on 3, 41-43, 54-55, 59-60, 113-114; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 55; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 69-73.

Running away, however, constituted the most common form of resistance by far. *Marronnage*, as it was called in the colony, occurred under a variety of circumstances and was undertaken by enslaved individuals in all regions of the island. Adult men absconded in greater numbers than women, but runaway slave advertisements indicate that creoles and Africans, field workers, skilled slaves, and those enslaved in urban areas all exercised *marronnage* as a method of protest against the wretched conditions of slavery.[76] Children also fled, even those as young as Marie Couvent when she first arrived. In 1768 Félicité, described as a "*négritte Arada*," ran away. She was only "eight or nine years old."[77] Like Félicité, some slaves escaped alone. Others left with their families or in small groups. On April 12, 1776, six slaves ran away from a plantation in Cavaillon. Latulype, Orphée, Content, and Adonis were all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six and "of the nation Mandigue." They were joined by two older Kongos, forty-year-old Télemaque and Pierre-Ignace who was about fifty-five years old.[78] Recently arrived Africans ran away, too. In November 1771 a notice announced that "two new *négresses*, Arada, one named Colette called *la Noire* (the black) and the other Laurence called *la Rouge* (the red), branded Davy, about 25 to 30 years old, speaking very little French" had been missing for about a month.[79] With linguistic skills limited to their own Gbe language and no knowledge of the geography, Colette and Laurence likely had a difficult time remaining maroons.[80]

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[76] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 51; Marronnage database, accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info /en/index.html.

[77] Marronnage database, accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr /lire.php?type =annonce&id=2228.

[78] Marronnage database, accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type =annonce&id=5048.

[79] Marronnage database, accessed June 10, 2013, accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info /fr /lire.php ?type=annonce&id=3169.

[80] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 52.

Because the reasons behind an enslaved individual's decision to run away depended on their specific circumstances, the length of time a person remained a maroon varied. Some slaves absconded temporarily to avoid or dispute a punishment, visit family and associates on another plantation, or to protest the behavior of the manager. This was referred to as *petite marronnage*, and in some instances, it allowed the slave to negotiate better treatment. Other slaves ran away permanently and only returned if they were caught. Skilled slaves and especially women fled to urban areas where they could pass as free people of color and earn a living. Some people remained near the plantation and procured food from gardens, hunting, and fishing. Others headed to the remote parts of the colony, particularly the underdeveloped mountainous areas. Although groups of maroons in Saint-Domingue were never as large as their counterparts in Jamaica or Suriname, maroon bands did exist in the colony throughout the eighteenth century. The men and women living in these communities formed the ultimate symbol of rebellion: they "maintained open, armed conflict with the plantation society that surrounded them, claiming and defending their liberty."[81]

The Code Noir included laws intended to suppress *marronnage* by delineating severe punishments for individuals who remained away longer than one month. The first time this occurred the apprehended slave was to have both ears cut off and a shoulder branded with a fleur-de-lis. The next time called for a second brand and a hamstring snipped. The third infraction was punishable by death.[82] Thus, prior offenders bore obvious marks of their crimes on their bodies. Numerous notifications of absconded slaves described these permanent signs of discipline. Marguerite, a forty-year-old

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[81] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 52-53, quote on 54; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 51-55.
[82] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 53.

"Congo" slave had been missing for eight months when Madame Chausson published an advertisement in the newspaper. Marguerite had been seen in Quartier-Morin and was claiming to be free. This was clearly not the first time Marguerite ran away. The notice described her as having her ears cut and "*fleurdelisée*."[83] In this ad, the word fleur-de-lis has been turned into a verb to signify the act of branding the symbol of the French monarchy onto the body a *marron* slave. In detailing the physical features of Marguerite and so many other repeat runaways like her, such notices reveal the determination of enslaved individuals to risk disfigurement and death to live outside the confines of slavery.

Not all slaves attempted to run away, poisoned the master, or committed other outright acts of resistance. The ways in which enslaved individuals reacted to their specific circumstances varied, depending on their personality, life experiences, and how they understood their enslavement.[84] Surviving within Saint-Domingue's system of slavery often meant making difficult choices for oneself or loved ones at the expense of others. It commonly required accommodation and obedience, if not acceptance of one's situation. Survival also meant "constant rebuilding of new connections out of the succession of transitory circumstances through which most [slaves] found themselves propelled" as interchangeable pieces of property "sold or transferred...for purposes of personal gain." Enslaved Africans expressly challenged this definition of their slave status when they made friends, created families, and otherwise formed social connections

[83] Marronnage database, accessed June 10, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php ?type =annonce&id=2450.

[84] Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica*, 90-91, 113; Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 85.

which they did in order to replace and replenish the identities lost through their enslavement.[85]

In making these connections to create lives for themselves and build new communities, enslaved Africans drew on their past experiences, cultural practices, and worldviews. They blended their numerous and diverse traditions—religious beliefs and cosmologies; dances and music; social rituals of births, deaths, and family formation; languages and dialects; healing practices; foods and cooking. They incorporated elements from the masters' world—Catholic traditions, medical practices, and European material culture. Together with their American-born descendants, they created a creole language, fusing African syntaxes with French words. The culture of the enslaved that developed over the course of the colonial period was enriched by continuous importations of new African-born people and modified through contact with French immigrants, white creole colonists, and free people of color. Neither a wholesale replication of African cultures nor something entirely new, it served as an important source of resistance for slaves in Saint-Domingue.[86]

Enslaved individuals made social connections and performed cultural practices on plantations, in cities and towns, and spaces in between. With the greater part of their time dedicated to plantation production, slaves carved out moments to socialize or hold religious ceremonies at night or on their free days. By law, at least, slaves did not work on Sundays or holidays. These days were usually spent tending personal gardens and gathering with friends and family. Many masters reduced their expenses by providing

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[85] Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 83.

[86] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 42-43; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 39-41; Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries*, 2; Donald Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed., Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 35-36, 40-41.

their slaves with garden plots on which they could grow provisions. Extra crops could then be sold at the market, earning the vendor money and traded goods. Market days, held on Sundays and holidays, also afforded the slaves who were allowed to attend important opportunities to mingle with people from other plantations and towns.[87]

Following the market, slaves frequently attended dances. Accompanied by drums and other musical instruments, dancing was the most popular form of group entertainment. Dances not only brought people together, they allowed individuals of a shared cultural background to connect through performing specific movements and their corresponding rhythms. According to white creole Moreau de Saint-Méry, "[e]ach nation displayed its own originality, and the dancers, eager to sustain the prestige of their respective nations, would solicit the approval of the spectators in its favor."[88] Of course, new styles and sounds were improvised as well. Slaves also held dances on the plantation in violation of the Code Noir which prohibited gatherings of slaves from different estates. In the early eighteenth century, French priest Jean-Baptiste Labat observed that laws against slave dances in Martinique were designed "to prevent too many blacks from assembling and who, finding themselves thus gathered together in joy and usually inebriated, are capable of revolts, insurrections or raids." Labat pointed out, however, that "it is almost impossible to suppress [the dances], because, of all the diversions, this is the one which [the slaves] enjoy the most and to which they are most sensitive."[89] Planters in Saint-Domingue arrived at the same conclusion, and slave dances were commonly left alone. Enslaved men and women worked long hours and then traveled several miles to attend a dance, skirting the restrictions on their mobility by moving under the cover of

[87] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 48-49; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 32-33, 39.
[88] Quoted in Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 41.
[89] Quoted in Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 41.

darkness. This determination clearly indicates the importance these gatherings were to enslaved individuals' well-being.[90]

Dancing and drums were not solely a form of leisure activity. They played key roles in the spiritual cultures of many societies to which enslaved Africans originally belonged and continued to be utilized in religious practices in the colony. The performance of specific movements of the body, rhythms on the drums, and songs created sacred spaces and allowed communication between the human world and the spirit world.[91] Thus, some gatherings where dances were performed were religious ceremonies. As described by Moreau de Saint-Mèry, one such religious dance was called "*Vaudoux*" which he explained was also the name of "an all-powerful, supernatural being," according to the "Arada" slaves that comprised the adherents to this institution "in which superstition and some bizarre practices have a great part."[92] What Moreau de Saint-Mèry described as a dance, a deity, and a set of "superstitious" beliefs was the creolized product of multiple African religions. Forged under slavery, these ritual practices and belief system have evolved to what today is known as Haitian Vodou.[93]

Deriving its name from the Fon word for "god" or "spirit" (*vodun*), Vodou draws largely upon the religious practices of Gbe-speaking groups such as Dahomey, Mahi, Hueda, and Allada that were embarked from the Slave Coast and made up a majority of

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[90] Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 40-41, 45; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 49.

[91] Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 11.

[92] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilization That Perished,* 1.

[93] The historical development of Vodou in Haiti underwent several distinct epochs, yet Vodou is not a singular religious entity. In Haiti today there are local and regional variations and it continues to evolve. See Cosentino, "Imagine Heavean," 52-53. Karen McCarthy Brown explains, "It was outsiders who first used the word 'Vodou' to name the whole of Haiti's traditional religious practice. Formerly in Haiti Vodou referred only to a particular style of ritualizing, one among several in Haiti's African religious repertoire. There are now Haitians who use the word generically, but most Haitians, most of the time, still prefer to say that they 'serve the spirits.' " Brown, "Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou" in Consentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou,* 205.

the slaves imported in the early eighteenth century. These spiritual practices mixed readily with those of the neighboring Yoruba, a process which began in the Bight of Benin region and continued in Saint-Domingue. By the end of the eighteenth century, West Central Africans predominated among the colony's enslaved population, and this demographic shift is reflected in the strong Kongo influences found in Vodou beliefs and practices. Thus, "Arada," "Nâgo," and "Congo" slaves created Vodou by fusing together the corresponding elements of their individual religions: "[b]elief in a pantheon of intermediary spirits [*lwa*] who may be appeased through sacrifice and manifested through spirit possession; the liturgical efficacy of music and dance; the sacral power of images and spirit-infused objects; the generational cycle of death and rebirth; [and] the benign orchestration of a distant god." Marked by an aesthetic of *assemblage*, Vodou rites and sacred art also incorporate a wide range of objects, ideas, and imagery from non-African cultures, most notably Catholic rituals and iconography.[94]

Vodou and other African-derived spiritual, healing, and divination practices served as a source of strength for the enslaved men and women who took part in them. Through ceremonies the *lwa* could be called upon to provide advice, protection, solace, treatments for both physical and spiritual ailments, and "vengeance against their oppressors."[95] Practiced in small, autonomous groups, appropriately called families, Vodou also allowed enslaved individuals to (re)create the social connections that were severed by their enslavement. Men and women who were religious leaders before their arrival sought out new adherents in the colony and together they created communities out

[94] Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," 29-32, 35-36, quote on 29; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 43; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 164, 166.

[95] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 42.

of disparate peoples.[96] As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, "community is both the occasion for and the product of virtually all Vodou ritualizing."[97] White colonists recognized the subversive nature of Vodou communities and their influential leaders. Moreau de Saint-Mèry wrote, "In a word, nothing is more dangerous in every respect than this cult of *Vaudoux*, founded on the extravagant notion—but one which can become a terrifying weapon—that the ministers of the being decorated by this name know all and can do all."[98] The spiritual communities built around "serving the spirits" certainly instilled in many enslaved men and women a confidence and identity outside of slavery that undermined the dehumanizing institution. These powerful beliefs and sustaining practices "helped lay the foundation for the revolt that ultimately brought complete freedom to the slaves" and perhaps played a direct role through a ceremony which was said to have been held before the insurrection began.[99]

Urban Slavery/Urban Freedom in Cap Français

Plantation agriculture may be viewed as the raison d'être for slavery in Saint-Domingue, but unfree labor performed by people of African descent existed in all parts of the colony, including the cities, towns, and villages that linked plantations to their internal and international markets. On the eve of the Revolution, the colony's largest city, Cap Français, contained an estimated 15,000 full-time residents, two-thirds of which

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[96] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 43; Brown, "Serving the Spirits," 207; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 26, 106, 144; Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering," 83.

[97] Brown, "Serving the Spirits," 205.

[98] Quoted in Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 59.

[99] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, quote on 43; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 44-45. At some point before the uprising, likely the night of August 21, slaves involved in the insurrection gathered together and held a religious ceremony at a wooded area known as Bois-Caïmon. For more on the Bois-Caïmon ceremony, its role in the revolt, and its symbolic importance in Haitian history see Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 99-102; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 93-94, 260-266; David Geggus, "The Bois Caïmon Ceremony," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 81-92.

were enslaved men, women, and children. Slaves in the city worked in all manner of occupations from unloading ships on the quay to constructing buildings, fashioning wigs and clothing, and managing households. These various jobs, many of them skilled positions, and the more intimate and integrated residential patterns of city living provided enslaved individuals in urban areas more opportunities than their counterparts on plantations. For the slaves that lived and worked in Cap Français, the overall experience of slavery differed greatly from that of those enslaved individuals in the rural plains and mountains.[100]

Cap Français underwent tremendous growth during the second half of the eighteenth century. Much of this growth took place between 1764 and 1789, coinciding with Marie Couvent's arrival in Saint-Domingue. As a likely resident of Le Cap throughout this period, Couvent witnessed the explosion in population and development of urban space. According to Moreau de Saint-Mèry, the size of the city had tripled in the fifty years prior to the Revolution. The population growth was quite rapid between 1771 and 1778 when the number of people increased from 4,464 to 12,151. Some of this growth can be attributed to undercounting free people of color in previous censuses as well as the continuing elevated imports of slaves. After 1783, the influx of French immigrants who were overwhelmingly young, single men further enlarged the city. Of the 15,000 inhabitants of Le Cap in 1789, an estimated 3,600 were whites, 1,400 were free people of color, and 10,000 were slaves. Additionally, about 1,000 soldiers lived in

[100] Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 58, 65-66; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 108.

the city's garrison and an estimated 2,500 sailors occupied the city at any given time, bringing the total to 18,500.[101]

The physical layout of Le Cap also expanded as a result of the population growth. Blocked from extending northward due to the mountains, the city developed to the south and west, away from the waterfront. The 1780s saw the completion of a number of improvements and public works, including paved streets, the construction of aqueducts, fountains, and public baths, and the addition of several public squares. The city conformed to a grid plan with most residential lots measuring about sixty by sixty square feet. Lots usually contained multiple structures that surrounded a courtyard. These separate houses and outbuildings were often rented or used as slave quarters. The total number of houses almost doubled between 1766 and 1788. By that time, the city contained over 1,300 houses, most of which were made of stone and many had two stories. Although undeveloped lots still existed in Le Cap, the density of urban living was high, and people of varying racial, social, and national backgrounds resided in the same spaces.[102]

Cap Français was a bustling center of commerce, government, and culture for its inhabitants as well as the entire northern plain. Located on a natural harbor, it existed as the urban base of operations for its extensive agricultural hinterland, supporting well over 1,000 sugar, indigo, and coffee plantations. It served as the main port and market for hundreds of thousands of slaves entering the colony and the large volume of the products

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[101] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 56, 58; Paul Butel, "Le Modèle Urbain à Saint-Domingue au XVIIIe Siècle: L'Investissement Immobilier dans les Villes de Saint-Domingue" in *Cities and Merchants: French and Irish Perspectives on Urban Development, 1500-1900*, eds. Paul Butel and Louis Cullen (Dublin, Ireland: Department of Modern History, Trinity College, 1986), 151-152; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 104, 106, 108-109. For an explanation of the unreliable nature of Saint-Domingue censuses, see Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 101-104, 109.

[102] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 56, 58; Butel, "Le Modèle Urbain à Saint-Domingue," 151-152; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 88, 106; Rogers, "On the Road to Citizenship," 72.

of their labor going out. Moreau de Saint-Mèry reported that ships constantly filled the harbor, and the quay remained busy with men loading barrels of sugar, rum, indigo, and coffee beans onto ships and unloading European goods—fabric and clothing, furniture and luxury household items, and foodstuffs. Le Cap's myriad economic activities mostly took place in the lower part of town where the merchants' shops, business firms, and markets were located. On Sundays, sailors sold the goods they brought with them at the *marché des blancs* (white market), while slaves from nearby plantations joined those in the city to sell produce and crafts at the *marché des nègres*.[103]

The upper portion of the city housed much of the government-related structures, including the Government House, the seat of the provincial administration and the courthouse, the army barracks, and a prison. The regulation of business and other legal issues required a host of bureaucrats, judges, lawyers, and notaries. David Geggus estimates that about one-third of Le Cap's white males worked for the government. Other institutions in the city included a convent, two hospitals, and a sizeable church, located midway between the harbor and the Government House. An area to the far north of the city, on the water, housed the artillery park and arsenal. Overall, there were seventy-nine public structures in Cap Français.[104]

Beyond the shops and offices, residents and visitors, alike, could find many ways to be entertained in Le Cap. The large public squares, especially the gardens in front of the Government House, and the Sunday markets were utilized as promenades by individuals eager to see and be seen. The city had a newspaper, a reading room, an

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[103] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 59-60, 67; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 22, 24, 48-49; Geggus, "The French Slave Trade," 126; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 89, 91, 93, 98-100.

[104] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 56, 59; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 22-24; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 89, 100, 109.

intellectual society known as the Cercle des Philadelphes, a Masonic Temple, billiard parlors, and numerous drinking and gambling establishments. One of the more popular of leisure activities was attending the Salle de Spectacle to see the latest French plays and operas as well as local productions. The theatre could seat 1,500 people, although its boxes were racially segregated. The ten highest rows were designated for free people of color, separating them between those who were mixed race and those who were not. Le Cap's many cultural offerings earned it the title "The Paris of the Antilles."[105]

Yet, despite its French flavor, Cap Français was very much a Caribbean city.[106] Describing the scene as a new arrival would view the city upon stepping unto the quay, Moreau de Saint-Mèry wrote, "How different from the places left behind! One sees four or five black or darkened faces for every white one."[107] Indeed, the success of such a large and lively town depended on labor, and most of this work was performed by enslaved men, women, and children. Certainly slaves undertook the majority of city's manual labor—loading and unloading the ships, carting the goods to and from the docks, constructing new houses, or making bricks. Slaves also participated in other types of occupations such as wigmaking, cooking, fishing, and washing clothes. A number of enslaved men and women held skilled positions. Men were coopers, cabinetmakers, tailors, and blacksmiths. Women were seamstresses, midwives, and shopkeepers (*marchandes*). These types of jobs often offered slaves the chance to earn income for

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[105] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 22, 24; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 56, 62; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 88-89; *Plan de la Ville du Cap François et de ses Environs dans l'Isle St. Domingue*, 1786, accessed July 9, 2013, http://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCB~1~1~2357~3900004:Plan-de-Ville-du-Cap-Francois-et.

[106] Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 89.

[107] Quoted in Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 22.

themselves as well and provided them with a degree of flexibility and freedom of movement that plantation slaves rarely experienced.[108]

A large number of urban slaves were domestic servants, a category that encompassed a variety of positions and tasks and included men and women of all ages. Domestic positions consisted of valets, coachmen, stable hands, laundresses, seamstresses, nursemaids, waiting maids, servants, cooks, and *menagères* (household managers). These slaves fulfilled the household duties of food purchasing and preparation, cleaning, washing, and childcare. They also performed utility work, provided transportation, and cared for the animals. If rented out, these slaves could earn income for their master or mistress. Domestic slaves often served a social purpose, as well. The richest city-dwellers owned a superfluous number of enslaved individuals to indulge themselves and to flaunt their wealth.[109] As Moreau de Saint-Mèry put it, "the dignity of a rich man consisted in having four times as many domestics as he needed."[110] Domestic slaves, then, provided unpaid labor, potential income, and social standing to their owners.

Given her young age at the time she was transported to Saint-Domingue, it is reasonable to suggest that Marie Couvent was sold to someone in the city, perhaps to serve in the household as a domestic slave. Although planters did purchase enslaved youth for their workforces, urban residents made for more likely buyers for several reasons. For one thing, enslaved children usually cost less than adults. This was particularly true for imported African children and for those individuals as young as

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[108] Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 109; Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 64-66; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 289; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 9.

[109] Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 109; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 85, 91-92; Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 16; Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 61-62.

[110] Quoted in Fick, *The Making of Haiti,* 16.

Couvent when she arrived. The lower price of children allowed individuals of lesser means to join the ranks of slaveholder through their purchase. Since slave ownership provided social standing, this strategy was helpful to the large number of Frenchmen that migrated to Saint-Domingue in search of quick riches and settled in Cap Français. The city's free men and women of color, many of whom were "of quite modest means" also took advantage of less expensive enslaved children.[111]

In addition to the lower initial outlay for enslaved youth, the city offered diversified ways to both utilize and profit from slave children. For masters or mistresses seeking to enjoy a retinue of domestic slaves, children increased the size of the household for a smaller cost than an adult, and they could be set to less strenuous or unessential tasks. Owners could also train enslaved children for a specific position, starting at a young age. For example, a *mulatresse libre* named Marie Anne *dite* Morin sold Theodore Gentilhomme, a creole boy, to Monsieur Pierre Doizé for 1200 *livres*. Theodore was only eight years old but was described as valet.[112] Additional skills could be taught to the slave by apprenticing him or her to a master craftsman like the free woman of color, Zabeau Bellanton, who apprenticed her slave Louis to a wigmaker.[113] Bellanton also made money by pawning newly-purchased African children for a tiny proportion of their value. When she found someone to buy the slave outright, she returned the pawn price and sold the slave for much more than she originally paid. Historian Stewart King argues that this

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[111] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 83, quote on 85; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 287; Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 71. Bernard Moitt includes the example of a French immigrant who purchased a boy and girl "both as domestics and as investments." In a letter to his mother in 1786, the Frenchman explained that he had made the boy a valet and apprenticed the girl to a seamstress.

[112] Vente de negrillon Marie Anne ditte Morin au S. Doizé, June 4, 1785, Acts of Bordier Jeune, Saint-Domingue (hereafter SDOM) 190, Dépôt des papiers publics des colonies, Archives nationales d'outre mer, Aix-en-Provence, France; hereafter DPPC, ANOM.

[113] Procuration Zabeau Bellanton au S. Viard, August 29, 1782, Acts of Bordier Jeune, SDOM 181, DPPC, ANOM.

allowed Bellanton "to share the risk of [the slaves'] 'seasoning' "—the period following captives' arrival when the threat of death was high. If the slave died while pawned, Bellanton's loss was partially offset by the revenue she received from the temporary buyer.[114] With these options, slave owners could more quickly capitalize on their investment in an enslaved child in the city than on a plantation where the bulk of the labor required an adult's strength.

The structure of urban slavery provided masters with ready-access to a market that allowed them to hire their slaves out for day wages, rent their slaves out for an extended period, or re-sell their slaves at a marked up price.[115] Many, if not most, urban slaves performed services and manufactured goods for money. In addition to providing unpaid labor to their master or mistress' household, slaves earned income for their owners by working for the owner's business, working for a customer, or as rented labor. Specialized training added immense value to enslaved individuals, as property. Masters paid more for skilled slaves, but they also profited greatly from their abilities. They could, in fact, potentially earn a higher return on "their individual slave investments" in an urban setting than on the plantation. Moreover, since urban slave owners relied on the skills and knowledge of their slaves, they were also "often dependent on their slaves' loyalty and goodwill in order to profit from their skills." [116] The dynamics of this relationship gave enslaved individuals a bargaining tool, so to speak, and they frequently

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[114] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 82. King found other examples of pawning slaves that also involved newly-arrived African children. In contrast to Bellanton, these examples seemed to have been motivated by "economic desperation." One free man of color pawned a twelve-year-old girl to a white man for debt forgiveness and cash, but the original owner had to also pay the receiver monthly rent on the enslaved girl. See King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 118.

[115] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 286-287, 289; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 116-118; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 66-67.

[116] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, first quote on 105, second quote on 91.

used it to their advantage by gaining permission to keep some of their earnings or negotiating terms to eventually purchase their freedom.[117]

Thus, the same mechanisms that made urban slavery highly profitable for slave owners also provided enslaved men, women, and children with opportunities that rural slaves rarely had. Many of the tasks assigned to slaves in Cap Français required them to work outside of their master's home and under the direction of someone else, and others worked under little or no supervision at all. Some slaves even arranged for their own lodging and food, as a condition of their master allowing them to retain a portion of their earnings. Enslaved individuals frequently moved about the city in order to complete their work which also gave them increased independence and provided daily opportunities for contact with other enslaved people, free men and women of color, and whites of different classes. Some slaves took advantage of their mobility and the large size of Cap Français to escape bondage by blending into the crowd and living as free people.[118]

Not all slaves in the city were rented or hired out, however. Numerous enslaved individuals in Le Cap worked for their owner in a business or as a domestic in the household. In these situations, slaves in urban areas worked more closely with their masters than slaves on large plantations.[119] Some slaves in the city, particularly the large number of domestics, also lived in close proximity to their owners, usually occupying small rooms called *cabinets* attached to the house or separate buildings located in the courtyard behind the house. On one hand, this brought an individual's daily life under

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[117] Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 91.

[118] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 66-68.

[119] By this comparison, I mainly mean field workers. Domestics on plantations would live in or near the house and work closely with their masters. Enslaved individuals on smaller plantations and farms , especially those that consisted of a family and only a few slaves, would also have more contact with their owners than on large plantations. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 92-93.

careful scrutiny by the master. On the other, enslaved men, women, and children who worked and lived closely with their masters developed more personal relationships with the people who owned them.[120]

Ties between slaves and their masters—whether white or free people of color—did not guarantee that enslaved individuals would be treated well. The conditions of urban slavery allowed for some advantages over plantation slavery, but the institution was no less harsh. The violence and unpredictability of life for those classified as property occurred in the city just as readily as on the plantation. Slaves were physically and sexually abused. They were sold or inherited which could break up their families, send them to a plantation, or move them to the other end of the island.[121] Additionally, the different methods of extracting capital from enslaved people in the cities—renting, hiring, pawning—meant that these slaves had multiple masters that they had to work for and obey.

There were, however, some advantages to forming a relationship with the master or mistress. Owners were more willing to free slaves whom they felt deserved it in some way and this decision was often based on the knowledge a master had of an individual slave. This became more so as restrictions continued to be placed on manumissions over the eighteenth century. In the 1740s the legislature introduced a liberty tax on each manumitted slave, the amount of which continued to increase. By 1775, it cost up to

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[120] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 40, 67; Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Mèry, *Description Topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la Partie française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue,* Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1797), 99. For an example of a house with cabinets see Transport de droits par Le S. Jean Baptiste Maurau à S. Jean Severin Godin, Acts of Cormaux de la Chapelle, December 7, 1783, SDOM 408, DPPC, ANOM.

[121] Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 66.

2,000 *livres* to free an enslaved adult.[122] One way for masters to counter this charge was to allow a slave to purchase his or her freedom with an agreed upon sum. In 1786 Monsieur Clavier registered the freedom of his slave, Jeannette, with a notary in Le Cap. He explained that he had allowed Jeannette to work for her own account in order to buy her freedom, not wanting to "sacrifice the price of this *nègresse*." Jeannette had accumulated 3,330 *livres*, which Clavier accepted from her in exchange for her liberty.[123] Historian Stewart King found that self-purchase was "a significant source of income for slave owners, particularly in bad years" in the colony's North and West departments.[124] For urban slaves, the working and living conditions that brought them in daily contact with their masters combined with the possibility of earning an income to raise their chances of gaining their freedom through self-purchase.

Self-purchase offered enslaved individuals one important avenue to freedom. More commonly, however, masters who chose to free a slave did so at will. Manumission documents in Saint-Domingue notary records include a variety of circumstances under which enslaved individuals were freed. Often a generic phrase referencing the slave's "good and loyal service" was provided as the reason for the emancipation, but some records included more detail. Sieur Jean Baptiste Larroque Lepine manumitted his creole slave Françoise in 1786, citing the care she provided for him during his different illnesses.[125] The widow Aubert freed her slave Pierre Thimoté for stopping a plot to burn her plantation by three men and two women in his *atelier*. So pleased with his loyalty,

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[122] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 108; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 85-86; Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 153.

[123] Requete et Procuration fin de Liberté Sr. Clavier en faveur de Jeanette, May 7, 1785, Acts of Bordier, Jeune, SDOM 190, DPPC, ANOM.

[124] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 11. In contrast, John Garrigus' study of free people of color in the South found that self-purchase was much less common in that region. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 55.

[125] Liberté par M. Larroque Lepine à la n.ée Françoise m.sse creole, July 16, 1786, Acts of Cassannet, SDOM 371, DPPC, ANOM.

Aubert also provided Pierre Thimoté with 300 *livres* each year for the rest of his life.[126] Other records make clear that a familial relationship existed between the owner and the slave. For example, Jean Baptiste Mouton, a free black man described as a cooper and former member of the Cap Français' militia, manumitted his daughter, Fanchette, in 1781.[127]

Although not always readily announced in manumission records, kinship ties and sexual partnerships between masters and slaves were the impetus behind numerous acts of liberty. This fact is reflected in the breakdown of individuals who received their freedom. Overall, women gained their freedom more than twice as often than men, and women and children together made up the largest proportion of manumitted slaves. Creoles were more often freed than African-born slaves and a significant proportion of manumitted creoles were also of mixed race.[128] However, differences in emancipation patterns existed between white and free colored owners. In his sample from parishes in the North and West, King found that fifty percent of slaves manumitted by whites were of mixed race, whereas seventy-three percent of slaves freed by free people of color were described as "black."[129]

That the large majority of freed slaves were women and children emphasizes the extremely vulnerable positions in which women were placed under slavery. Enslaved women functioned as sources of productive and reproductive labor, and, as such, their

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[126] Consentement de liberté et pension par M.de V.e Aubert au Nommé Pierre Thimoté griffe, May, 1, 1792, Acts of Bressat, SDOM 258, DPPC, ANOM.

[127] Liberté de la nommée Fanchette negresse, June 15, 1781, Acts of Cassannet, SDOM 361, DPPC, ANOM. For information on the role of free men of color in the colony's militia and police forces see King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, Chapter 4, 52-77.

[128] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 108; Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 151; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 265, 268-269; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40, 47, 56-57, 60. King found free people of color much more willing to denote a familial relationship in manumission records than whites.

[129] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 108.

bodies and the children to whom they gave birth belonged to the person that owned them. The racial and sexual hierarchies of power left enslaved women with few ways to protect themselves from rape and sexual abuse, and, sexual violence was a common feature of women's experiences of slavery.[130] The accessibility of enslaved women as sexual partners of white men was thus condoned by the logic of slavery and exacerbated by the imbalance of colonial demographics, in which white men greatly outnumbered white women. Laws in Saint-Domingue attempted to control sexual relationships between white men and women of African descent, at first by encouraging masters to marry the enslaved women with whom they had children. Over time, however, colonial policy shifted so that "the law, originally invoked to suppress sexual relations between free persons and slaves, soon functioned to displace responsibility for the taboo act onto slave women and persons of mixed race, thus enabling the continuance of libertinage."[131]

Sexual encounters between enslaved women and free men occurred along a spectrum of coercion and consent, insofar that an individual deemed a piece of property could have a consensual relationship. Women were outright raped or otherwise forced into sexual liaisons. Some received payment or were provided extra food, clothing, or other privileges. Enslaved women employed as domestics in the household were particularly vulnerable to the sexual advances of the master or his male relatives and friends. However, some women entered into long-term relationships or even marriages with free men (although the latter was more frequent between enslaved women and free

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[130] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1, 3, 9; Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 99; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 47; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,* 198.

[131] Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,* quote on 197, 205; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 41-42; 56; Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 152-153. Marriage between whites and people of African descent were never outlawed.

men of color than white men). It was common for these women to serve as *ménagères*, managing the household for their partner and in many ways fulfilling the role of wife. [132]

Such relationships, even those that lasted many years, did not guarantee enslaved women better treatment or freedom. Yet for a number of women, sexual partnerships and the creation of families with free men did lead to the manumission of themselves and/or their children. In the colony's earliest years, these relationships involved enslaved women and white men, but as the free nonwhite population increased, free black and colored men also formed liaisons and families with enslaved women and some of them also chose to exercise their rights as masters to manumit their enslaved family members. Avenues of freedom for slaves in Saint-Domingue were clearly gendered, and, for women, sexuality factored significantly in their access to manumission.[133]

Children, as the products of these relationships between enslaved women and free men, also benefited this way. In fact, free fathers more readily manumitted their children than their enslaved partners. Of course not all children were freed, as the percentage of mixed-race slaves on plantations makes clear. However, fathers who did emancipate their enslaved children often donated or bequeathed land, slaves, and money to their offspring. Some men explicitly claimed their paternity and in many of these cases, lived with his children and their mother and treated them as his family.[134]

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[132] Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 265; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 47; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40, 56-57; Garraway, *The Libertine Colony,* 214; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 181, 183. *Ménagères* were not always sexual partners of the master although that stereotype of women in this position was strong. This household manager position was also frequently filled by free women of color who may or may not have been enslaved at one time. This will be discussed in more detail below. Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 58 and King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 191.

[133] Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 159; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 180-181, 183-185.

[134] Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 60, 62, 65; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 184-185; Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 159-160.

Laws governing manumissions changed over the course of the eighteenth century, becoming more restrictive in attempts to limit a master's ability to free his or her slaves. The 1685 Code Noir placed very few constraints on slave owners who wanted to emancipate a slave. By the early 1700s, written permission to manumit a slave, including an explanation for doing so, had to be approved by the colonial Governor. Over time, a manumission tax was added. In an effort to curb the number of women that received their freedom, the tax amount was twice as high for them as it was for men. Once an owner had gained permission and paid the tax, he or she recorded an official act of manumission for the enslaved individual with a notary.[135]

These legal restrictions did little to stop masters from freeing their slaves. Official manumissions continued to be granted, despite the tax increases and other bureaucratic measures. Slave owners also found ways around these legal obstacles by according unofficial freedom to select slaves. Known as *libre de fait* or *libre de savane*, this type of manumission placed an individual in a category between free and slave. *Libres de fait* had a large degree of independence, often living as free people on the plantation or in a town. At the same time, slaves granted *libre de fait* usually continued to work for their masters in some capacity. They also existed in a highly vulnerable position since their unofficial freedom was not registered with a notary, and therefore, they did not have documentary proof of their status. *Libre de fait* manumission was granted to enslaved individuals of all ages, both sexes, and of various positions and backgrounds. Slaves that reached old age were often allowed to live as *libre de fait* and some masters used this status as a way to no longer take care of enslaved individuals too old to work. Women in

[135] Moitt, *Women and Slavery,* 152-155; Garrigus, *Before Haiti,* 40, 42; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 108-110. The tax could be waived for specific reasons such as saving the master's life or nursing him or her in bad health. Very young and very old people were also exempted from the tax.

relationships with their masters and the children they had together were also favored recipients of *libres de fait* manumission. These women and children lived as free persons while technically they remained the property of their partners or fathers.[136]

Given that manumissions in Saint-Domingue privileged women in sexual relationships with free men, it is conceivable that Marie Justine Sirnir received her freedom in this manner. Around the age of twenty-five, Sirnir, who was still enslaved, had a son named Celestin. Although the circumstances of his birth are unknown, the way she described Celestin in her 1812 will reveals several important details. Sirnir referred to her son as "a natural child," a "*mûlatre*," and the "slave of Mr. François Moreau."[137] The term "natural child" meant that Celestin was born out of wedlock, and the fact that Celestin was a mulatto meant that his father was white. It is quite possible that François Maurau was Celestin's father as well as his owner. Sirnir's reference to her son as "Celestin Moreau" lends weight to that theory, although it does not prove it. Whoever Celestin's father was, he did not free his son, at least not to Marie Justine's knowledge. She, however, did gain her freedom at some point. Although having a child with a white man did not guarantee an enslaved woman's emancipation, it is possible that Marie Justine Sirnir received her freedom from her son's father. If this was the case, her liberty may have been of the *libre de fait* sort rather than an officially recognized manumission.

[136] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 109; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 43; Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 151, 160-161.
[137] *Testament*, 1812.

Le Cap's *Femmes de Couleur Libres*

Given the substantial numbers of freed black women in Le Cap, it is likely that Marie Couvent received her freedom before the Haitian Revolution.[138] If so, she would have joined a substantial number of free women of color in Cap Français. Women, in fact, made up a majority of the free black population in the colony's urban areas, Le Cap, included.[139] White male commentators like Moreau de Saint-Mèry described free women of color, particularly "*mulatresses*" as prostitutes and concubines of white men, whose entire nature was made for the pursuit of pleasure, seduction, and luxury.[140] Recent studies of Cap Français notary records, however, found that this stereotype of free women of color obscured the reality of free black women's lives. For one thing, almost seventy percent of free women of color in Le Cap were black rather than of mixed racial heritage. Although some women did gain financial resources from relationships with white men, many others did so through their own entrepreneurship. Free colored women married and had families with both white and free black men. Overall, free women of color actively participated in the city's economy and society, performing much more diverse functions than white colonial contemporaries would lead one to believe.[141]

Free women of color in Le Cap earned income in various ways in both the service and commercial sectors. The most well-known occupation for free colored women was

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[138] Dominique Rogers found that 68.75 % of people of African descent freed in Le Cap between 1776 and 1789 were women. Of those freed women, 48.6 % were labeled as "black" and 12.6 % of the freed *negresses* were African-born. Rogers, "Les libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue," 71.

[139] Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 270; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 281-282; Rogers, "Les libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue," 70-71.

[140] Moreau de Saint-Mèry, *Description*, 81-85; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 279-280; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue," 270; Clark, 48-49.

[141] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 280, 283, 292-293; Rogers, "Les libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue," 71; Dominique Rogers and Stewart King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières: Free Women of Color in the Port Cities of Colonial Saint-Domingue, 1750-1790" in *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800*, eds., Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell (Brill: Leiden, Netherlands, 2012), 357-358; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 187-188, 194-195; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue," 270.

that of *ménagère* or housekeeper. Women who held this position contracted with a man to run his household for a set amount of time and salary. *Ménagères* could earn a sizeable income, averaging 1,000 *livres* per year. Hélène Picqery signed a two-year contract with François Sieriery, a white resident of Cap Français, to manage his household budget and supervise the shopping, cooking, and cleaning. In addition to her meals, lodging, clothing, and any medical needs, Picquery received a slave in payment for her work.[142] The contemporary popular perception of *ménagères* assumed that these women worked solely for white men and engaged in sexual relationships with their employers. Recent scholarship indicates, however, that free men of color and even some families hired *ménagères* to manage their households. In fact, many white men could not afford the expensive wages of a *ménagère*. While some women in this occupation did form relationships with men for whom they worked, not all *ménagères* did so. Dominique Rogers and Stewart King argue that for many free women of color, a *ménagère* position "was merely a life-cycle stage." Young women often used their earnings as a housekeeper to start a business, making themselves more attractive as marriage partners.[143]

Commercial enterprises, then, formed another important source of income for free women of color in Cap Français. Women ran shops and businesses and were heavily involved in the city's retail trade. These economic activities ranged from small-scale hawkers and peddlers to those who kept market stalls to shop keepers (*marchandes*) with their own storefront. Free women of color were particularly active in the retail of linens,

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[142] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 362-363, Clark, *American Quadroon*, 64. Rogers and King explain that Picquery's income of one slave "amounted to a salary of at least 900 *livres* per year."

[143] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 360-364, quote on 363.

fabrics, and other dry goods, which they purchased from importers and resold.[144] They also made and sold foodstuffs and household items. Louise Camoin sold the day's catch from her son's fishing operation, while a woman named Thèrése opened a tallow shop with two free black male business partners. Notary records often described Zabeau Bellanton, one of the wealthiest free women of color in Le Cap in the 1780s, as a jam and jelly-maker and a *marchande*. Bellanton may have first earned her living through the making and selling of fruit preserves, but she quickly invested her capital into other enterprises, most notably slave-trading. She also owned at least one enslaved man whose specialized skills included cook and jelly-maker.[145]

Like Bellanton, free women of color frequently owned slaves and participated in the urban slave trade as both buyers and sellers of enslaved individuals. They purchased slaves for their labor as well as financial investments. Bellanton owned four domestic slaves for her own household, while buying and selling numerous other slaves for quick profits. Women employed their slaves in various enterprises, including laundry services, domestic servants, cooks, and peddlers. They rented their slaves, as well. A free black woman named Marie rented her slave, Marguerite, to Anne Claire, *negresse libre*, for 600 *livres* per year for a total of three years. During that time, Anne Claire paid food, clothing, and lodging expenses, but she was not liable if Marguerite died or ran away.[146] Sometimes free women of color purchased family members and, if they had the means to do so, freed them. In 1785, Rose Zilia, a *negresse libre*, manumitted her sixteen-year-old

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[144] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 281-282; Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 365-366; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women of Saint-Domingue," 270.

[145] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 366; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 81.

[146] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 285-287, 289; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 81-83.

daughter, a *mulatresse* named Françoise. Rose Zilia had purchased her daughter from Sieur Granon six months prior to the recording of Françoise's emancipation.[147]

In addition to buying, selling, and owning slaves, real estate investments and transactions formed another important aspect of free women of color's economic activities. Many women owned their own homes. According to David Geggus, one-fifth of the houses in Cap Français were owned by people of African descent in 1776, which indicates that, on average, free colored residents owned at least one house in the city. A substantial portion of those home owners were women, while four-fifths were described as black (*négre/nègress*).[148] Investing in urban land was also common among free people of color. They often purchased property, even in the most fashionable neighborhoods, to sell later for a profit or to rent out.[149] Although there was no strict residential segregation, most free people of color lived further from the center of town, including an area to the south called "Petite Guinée" and the Petit-Carénage, a "working-class" neighborhood, according to Moreau de Saint-Mèry, located along the water in the far northeast corner of city near the navy yard.[150]

Jeanette Azulima was a free black woman who lived on Picolet street in the Petit-Carénage neighborhood.[151] Like Marie Justine Simir, Azulima ended up in New Orleans

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[147] Requete a fin de liberté par Rose Zilia en faveur de Françoise, June 1, 1785, Acts of Bordier, Jeune, SDOM 190, DPPC, ANOM.

[148] Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women of Saint-Domingue," 270; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 109; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 188. Geggus cites one-fifth of free colored homeowners as women, whereas King claims women made up close to one-half.

[149] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 282-284; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 26, 151-152.

[150] Moreau de Saint-Mèry, *Description*, 129; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 26; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women of Saint-Domingue," 270; Dubois, 23. Petit-Carénage was "a small suburb of fishermen and workmen" that became officially incorporated into Cap Français in 1789. See Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," quote on 368.

[151] Throughout the various notary and census records, Jeanette Azulima's name is rendered multiple ways included Jeanette *dite* Azulima, Jeanette *dite* Zulima, Jeanne Azulima, Jeanette Zulima, and Jeanette Azulime. Although it is possible that these are different women, every one of these subjects is described as a *negresse libre* living in the Petit-Carénage neighborhood. According to her will recorded in New Orleans,

after the Revolution and recorded a will there in 1811. At that time she was seventy-two years old and had been a "*femme de couleur libre* for many years."[152] Thus, Azulima was likely enslaved at some point, but by the 1780s she had gained her freedom. Described as a "*marchande*" in one notary record, Azulima was an active entrepreneur in Cap Français on the eve of the Revolution. She owned real estate as well as rented and sublet property, purchased slaves, and operated a business. She undertook some of these economic activities in partnerships with other people, including a group of free women of color in her neighborhood and a white man named Michel Maugendre. Azulima's endeavors indicate the various ways free women of color in Le Cap supported themselves, taking advantage of the opportunities the urban setting offered them.

In her will, Azulima claimed that she owned "several slaves that [she] had to abandon" in Le Cap. One of these enslaved individuals may have been Genevieve, a twenty-five-year-old woman trained as a laundress and a cook. "Jeanette *dite* Azulima, a *negresse libre*," purchased Genevieve on December 6, 1785 from another free black woman named Marie Roze *dite* Macadan (or Macadau) who also lived in the Petit-Carénage. Azulima paid 3,000 *livres* for Genevieve. [153] Genevieve's domestic labor skills allowed Azulima to employ the enslaved woman in her own household or rent her out to someone in need of washing or cooking. With an estimated rental rate of about ten percent of the slave's value, Azulima could earn 300 *livres* a year renting out Genevieve.[154] Three years later, Azulima purchased another slave named Marguerite, a

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Jeanette Azulima owned property on Picolet and Poudriere streets in Petit-Carénage. See *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811 in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 24, page 263, NARC.

[152] *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811.

[153] Vente d'une negresse par La nommée Marie Roze dite Macadan N.L. à La nom.ee Jeanette dite Azulima aussy N. L., December 7, 1786, Acts of Hourclaxt, SDOM 1102, DPPC, ANOM.

[154] Rogers and Stewart, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 364.

seventeen year old creole. She bought the young woman for 1,320 *livres* from Pierre Gilles, Elizabeth, Therese, and Marie Louise Henriette (whose name was branded on Marguerite)—all free black residents of Saint Sauveur street and presumably relatives. The purchase was made under the condition that the sellers had the right to redeem Marguerite for the same sum within the space of two years.[155]

Jeanette Azulima's purchase of Marguerite and Genevieve followed a gendered pattern of slaveholding among free women of color in Le Cap. Of the slaves owned by free women of color, women outnumbered men by far.[156] Rogers and King point out that this practice placed free women of color in an ideal position to benefit from the "strong demand for domestic help" found in the urban milieu. The city's population of less affluent, single white men, which had grown substantially in the 1780s, required housekeepers, laundresses, and cooks. Free women of color slave owners were quick to supply these needs by renting out their female slaves.[157]

Jeannette Azulima also participated in Le Cap's real estate market. Her will indicated that she owned two houses in Petit-Carénage purchased from someone named Trolet.[158] In addition to owning land in the neighborhood, Azulima also rented and sublet property there. On January 9, 1786, she teamed up with two other free women of color living in Petit-Carénage to rent two rooms in a dependency (a small structure built on the lot behind the main house or building) on the property belonging to the estate of the late Sieur François Salva. Along with "other objects," Jeanette Azulima, Genevieve *dite*

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[155] Vente de negresse par Pierre Gilles negre libre, Marie Louse Henriette, Elizabeth, et Therese neg.sses Libres à La nommée Jeanette Zulima n.sse L., October 20, 1788, Acts of Grimperel, SDOM 870, DPPC, ANOM.

[156] Socolow, "Economic Roles," 286; Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 364.

[157] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," quote on 364.

[158] *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811.

Bourgeois, and Marguerite *dite* Lambert rented the place from Sieur Mathieu Tardieu for two years, six months, and sixteen days. The women, in turn, sublet the space to Sieur André Olive, an innkeeper, on July 26, 1786. Olive had occupied the rooms since June 1, and the notary's documentation of the sublease made it official. Olive agreed to sublet the dependency for 2,970 *livres* per year until the end of the original lease from Tardieu, on July 25, 1788, paying his rent in installments every three months.[159] By subletting their rental, Azulima, Bourgeois, and Lambert took advantage of the high demand for housing in the city and gained access to a steady inflow of cash, which was notoriously scarce in the colony.[160]

In addition to profiting from the markets in slaves and real estate, Jeanette Azulima also formed a business partnership with Michel Maugendre, in which the two ran a bath house in Petit-Carénage. On January 30, 1788, Azulima and Maugendre rented a property in the neighborhood from Messieurs Leger and Company, acting as the agents for the Maillart heirs. The lot contained multiple structures, including a one story house of three rooms with a porch running the length of house and a cabinet (small room or closet) made of tile and brick. There were five small rooms made of wood that faced a square and another room divided by a partition that fronted Picolet street and was also made of tile and brick. Eight small cabinets, two of which were tiled, held the baths. The courtyard was paved in brick and a corridor running between the buildings was paved in terra cotta tiles. The parties agreed on a lease for three years at the price of 5,000 *livres* a

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[159] Bail de soulocation par les nommées Généviéve Bourgeois, Marguerite Lambert m.l. & la n.ée Jeanette d. Zulima N. L. au S. Olive, Acts of Cassanet, July 25, 1786, SDOM 371, DPPC, ANOM.

[160] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 370, 372. Although the original rental price they paid to Tardier is not known, it is likely that the three women earned a profit on their sublease of the two rooms to Olive, as this was a common practice. For example, Vincent Ogé rented a large house in Le Cap for 13,500 *livres* a year and earned a 1,320 *livres* profit by subletting it. See King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 129.

year, paid in installments every three months.[161] The outlay of Azulima's half of the rent over three years, 7,500 *livres*, was a decent sum of money, indicating both the level of success she had achieved at this point as well as the anticipation of earning income from the bath house.

Azulima and Maugendre's business reveals the diversity of enterprise in which Le Cap residents were involved. Besides accommodating bathers, the baths were likely also used as laundry facilities for the neighborhood's washwomen.[162] Additionally, Rogers and King suspect that the bath house was likely a "house of assignation."[163] Writing about a previously established public bath in Le Cap managed by a white man and a free woman of color, Moreau de Saint-Mèry explained that, unlike bath houses in Paris, "Here husband and wife, or those who can pass for such, can go to the same bath, and even to the same tub (a feature that attracts many devoted customers)."[164] Perhaps this explains why the rental contract stated that if a public market was established in nearby Place La Luzerne, the rent would increase up to thirty-three *livres* per year to pay for police fees to maintain the peace.[165] Likely this extra cost would go towards a municipal charge for

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[161] Bail a Loyer Srs. Leger et C.ie au Sr Maugendre et la nommée Jeanne Azulima N. L., January 30, 1788, Acts of Tach, SDOM 1637, DPPC, ANOM.

[162] Public baths were often used by laundresses in the colony's urban areas. In a 1788 ordinance for public baths opened in Port-au-Prince, laundresses were not allowed to use the facilities before daybreak or after sunset. To maintain order among the laundresses, the police inspector appointed an officer for each bath who was to make sure the women did not wash or beat the clothing upon the stone baths. *Ordonnance de MM. les Administrateurs. En date du 18 février 1788, concernant l'établissement des lavoirs dans la ville du Port-au-Prince. Alexandre de Vincent, Brigadier des armées du Roi, Commandant-Général & par interim des isles françoises de l'Amérique sous le vent, et François Barbé de Marbois, conseiller du Roi en ses conseils & en son Parlement de Metz, intendant de justice, police, finances, de la guerre & et de la Marine desdites isles. Extrait des registres du greffe du Conseil-supérieur de Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince, Saint-Domingue: De l'Imprimerie de Mozard, 1788), accessed August 6, 2013, in John Carter Brown Library- Haiti Collection, Archive.org, http://archive.org/details/ordonnance6991sain; James McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 89-90.

[163] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 361-362.

[164] Quoted in Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 362.

[165] Bail a Loyer Srs. Leger et C.ie au Sr Maugendre et la nommée Jeanne Azulima N. L., January 30, 1788, Acts of Tach, SDOM 1637, DPPC, ANOM. It is likely that the lot Azulima and Maugendre rented

additional police presence in the neighborhood on market days, but it may have also covered a payoff to keep the baths open for illicit purposes. Either way, Azulima and Maugendre surely welcomed the opening of the public market as it was certain to bring more customers to their business. The duration of the bath house's existence or how it fared as a commercial enterprise, however, remains unclear.

During the Revolution, Jeanette Azulima remained in the city, but she evidently moved on to other means of support. A census taken in 1803 listed her as a retail wine vendor on Picolet street in the Petit-Carénage.[166] She likely sailed for Baracoa, Cuba soon after the census was made, following the evacuation of French troops from the city in the fall of 1803.[167] Azulima left behind a prosperous life in Cap Français. During her time there, she attained her freedom, owned slaves and real estate, and participated in several commercial ventures. She arrived in Cuba with enough money to purchase additional property before relocating again to New Orleans.

Azulima indicated in the will she recorded in 1811 that she had no children or other relatives. She did, however, form important relationships in Le Cap through her economic activities as well as the Catholic Church, serving as godmother on at least two occasions.[168] Godparentage played an important role for free people of color in Saint-Domingue by creating and reinforcing social and kinship networks amongst individuals. In the absence of biological family relations disrupted by enslavement, ties formed

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from the Maillart heirs was located near the intersection of Picolet and Place de la Luzerne. In a cadaster made for Le Cap in 1787, the Maillart heirs are listed for several lots on Picolet and Place de la Luzerne. *Cadastre des Maisons de la Ville Cap*, 1787, G/1/495, DPPC, ANOM.

[166] *Recensement de la Ville du Cap An Onze*, G/1/496, DPPC, ANOM. Michel Maugendre was not included in the census and his fate remains unknown.

[167] Jeremy Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011),134; Gabriel Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba, 1793-1815" trans. David Cheramie in *The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees, 1792-1809,* eds. Carl Brasseaux and Glenn Conrad (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992), 44-45.

[168] *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811.

between children and godparents functioned as such for former slaves and others not far removed from slavery. For people of African descent with close connections to whites (and many of whom had been free for generations), godparentage emphasized these multiracial family connections even as the law sought to deny them.[169] Like many spiritual sponsors, Jeannette Azulima named her godchildren as legatees in her will. Once in New Orleans, she managed to continue some of the associations cemented around the baptismal font in Cap Français.

Famille Maurau

Marie Justine Sirnir also developed relationships in Saint-Domingue that carried over to New Orleans. If, like Jeannette Azulima, she gained her freedom in the years before war broke out on the island, Sirnir possibly followed a similar path of earning income through marketing or other enterprises and investing those earnings in slaves and land. Along the way, she surely made friends and may have formed partnerships with associates in her economic pursuits. She may have also served as someone's godmother, a role she undertook more than once in New Orleans. Yet, unlike Azulima, Sirnir had a child. Her enslaved son, Celestin, linked Marie Justine Sirnir with François Maurau and his family. Although the particulars of their relationship remain vague, the connection between Sirnir and the Mauraus endured.

Whether or not François Maurau was Celestin's father, he did start a family around the time of Celestin's birth. On September 10, 1780, Maurau married Jeanne

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[169] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 13, argues that this distinction was apparent between the free black "military leadership group, who lacked strong blood kinship ties" and the "planter group," which had close "links to white society." Free people of color in New Orleans utilized godparenthood in similar ways. See Emily Clark and Virginia Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Apr., 2002): 409-448.

Marie Françoise Ortigue in Cap Français. Described as "*marchand tailleur d'habits*," Maurau was the legitimate son of "Sieur Jean Maurau" and "Dame Françoise Laurain" and a native of St. Pierre parish in Les Essards in the province of Angoumois.[170] Jeanne Marie Françoise Ortigue, unlike her future spouse, was described as a minor. She was the legitimate daughter of Jean Henry Ortigue and Marie Jeanne Duchemin and born in Cap Français. Her father, a former building contractor in the city, was no longer living. As the bride's mother and legal tutor, Dame Duchemin gave Jeanne Marie Françoise permission to marry François Maurau. Friends, family, and other witnesses signed the marriage register. Most of the signatures belonged to Ortigue's family, including her sisters and brothers-in-law.[171] Apparently none of Maurau's family members witnessed the ceremony, suggesting he came to Saint-Domingue as one of the many single, young men in the post-Seven Years' War period.

Not long after François Maurau and Jeanne Marie Françoise Ortigue were married, the couple had a daughter named Marie Charlotte Fortunée. The child was born on November 7, 1781 and baptized hastily at home on June 8, 1782 because she was ill. Marie Charlotte Fortunée's godfather was Sieur Charles Alexandre Duplessis, the husband of her aunt, Marguerite Ortigue. The child's godmother was her other aunt, Dame Marie Anne Ortigue, wife of Sieur Jean Baptiste Germain.[172] It is likely that Marie Charlotte Fortunée died soon after her baptism.

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[170] Angoumois was a province in *ancien regime* France that corresponds with today's Charente Department.

[171] *M. Maurau François et Ortigue Mre Fse*, September 10, 1780, in *Etats Civil de Saint-Domingue*, folios 48-49, ANOM, accessed July 8, 2013, http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/caomec 2 /pix2web.php ?territoire=SAINT-DOMINGUE&commune=LE%20CAP&annee=1780.

[172] *B. Maurau Marie Charlotte Fortunée*, June 8, 1782, in *Etats Civil de Saint-Domingue*, folio 34, ANOM, accessed July 8, 2013, http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr /caomec2 /pix2web.php?territoire =SAINT-DOMINGUE&commune=LE%20CAP&annee=1782.

At this time the family lived on Vaudreuil street, which ran north to south through the middle of the city, parallel to the Bay du Cap.[173] Maurau likely had his tailor shop there, too. Presumably trained as a tailor in France, Maurau brought these skills with him to Le Cap, where he joined other white, free colored, and enslaved tradesmen. In addition to running his business, Maurau capitalized on his tailoring expertise by taking on apprentices. Both enslaved and free black youth were apprenticed to master tradesmen in order to gain instruction in various trades.[174] Two years after his marriage to Jeanne Marie Françoise Ortigue, Maurau contracted with a free woman of color to take her son as an apprentice. On April 12, 1782, Zabeth *dite* La Pommeraye, *négresse libre*, apprenticed her eleven-year-old son, Joseph, to Maurau. The apprenticeship would last five years, and La Pommeraye paid Maurau 900 *livres* in addition to continuing to provide for Joseph while he boarded with Maurau.[175] The apprenticeship allowed Zabeth *dite* La Pommeraye to provide her son with an education and skills he could utilize for future employment and economic stability. By training Joseph, Maurau gained a sizeable income and a free labor source during the five years of the boy's apprenticeship.

Of course enslaved individuals offered Maurau with another source of unpaid labor, and he very likely employed enslaved men or boys in shop. Perhaps he planned to train Celestin as tailor, too. If Sirnir's son was not born in Maurau's household, this

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[173] *Brevet d'aprentissage Susnommé Joseph*, April 12, 1782, Acts of Bordier, Jeune, SDOM 180, DPPC, ANOM; *Plan de le Ville du Cap François et de ses Environs dans l'Isle St. Domingue*, Sr. Phelipeau, (Paris, 1786); original in the John Carter Brown Library, accessed July 9, 2013, http://jcb.lunaimaging.com /luna/servlet/detail/JCB~1~1~2357~3900004:Plan-de-Ville-du-Cap-Francois-et.

[174] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 154; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 292.

[175] *Brevet d'aprentissage Susnommé Joseph*, April 12, 1782, Acts of Bordier, Jeune, SDOM 180, DPPC, ANOM. According to King, the price La Pommeraye paid Maurau was lower than the average 1,262 *livres* paid to white craftsmen and 1,166 *livres* paid to free men of color tradesmen. On the other hand, Susan Socolow found an apprenticeship to a free man of color in which no payment was made. King, however, suggests that payment reduced the number of years of the apprenticeship. See King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 154 and Socolow, "Economic Roles," 292.

would have been one reason for him to have purchased Celestin as a child. Owning slaves also allowed Maurau to branch out beyond his tailor business to other commercial ventures. On July 5, 1787, he and his wife, Françoise Ortigue purchased an entire fishing operation from François Janvier Latortue, a free black man living in Petit-Carénage. The purchase included the equipment consisting of multiple boats with their sails, rudders, oars, and anchors, drag nets, rope, fishing line, two new fish ponds (*viviers*), and a cart for transporting the day's catch. [176]

The sale also included the labor, comprised of twelve enslaved men between the ages of twenty and thirty. All of the men were African-born, mostly "Congo" and a few "Mandigue." The record described two of them as a "*patron de canot*" (boat manager) and one as the "*canotier*" (boater).[177] These three men must have managed the operation and sailed the boats. With this hierarchy in place, the twelve men likely worked under little supervision from Maurau. Yet, even with the relative freedom of movement afforded them as fishermen, these men remained enslaved, and at least one of them sought to escape his bondage. Perhaps in rejection of the pending sale or taking advantage of the change in owners, Pierre, a thirty-year old Congo man, ran away three days prior to the purchase.[178] Latortue promised to return Pierre to the Mauraus and, in the meantime, accept less money for the transaction.

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[176] *Vente de douze negres et objets du peche par Le no.e F.s Janvier Latortue ainé N.L. aux Sr et D.e Maureau*, July 5, 1787, Acts of Hourclaxt, SDOM 1107, DPPC, ANOM.

[177] *Vente de douze negres et objets du peche par Le no.e F.s Janvier Latortue ainé N.L. aux Sr et D.e Maureau*, July 5, 1787.

[178] *Vente de douze negres et objets du peche par Le no.e F.s Janvier Latortue ainé N.L. aux Sr et D.e Maureau*, July 5, 1787.

The total price of the sale was 42,000 *livres*, a large sum of money. The couple paid Latortue 20,000 *livres* at the time of sale, owing the rest in installments.[179] According to Dominique Rogers and Stewart King, an "affluent" individual in late-eighteenth century Saint-Domingue could afford to spend 10,000 *livres*, whereas a "moderate fortune" allowed for "between 50,000 and 80,000 *livres* of disposable income."[180] Maurau's tailor business must have been going well, although the money could have also come from his wife or an inheritance. That Maurau had the means to afford such a large purchase suggests that he may have also owned a plantation like Pierre Belly, another Le Cap tailor, who owned a plantation in Fonds-Lodin.[181] Besides access to food for his household, the fishing operation provided another source of revenue to supplement Maurau's business in Le Cap. In addition to the earnings made from selling the fish, the Mauraus gained a ready-made source of income through the subsequent sale of the enslaved fishermen, if necessary.

If the couple owned Marie Justine Sirnir or other enslaved women at this time, they likely employed them as fishmongers. This type of job would have allowed Marie Justine to earn money, which she may have been able to put towards purchasing her freedom. Sirnir's experience in New Orleans strongly suggests that she was familiar with marketing and the retail trade. In port cities throughout the Atlantic World, enslaved and free women of color dominated urban domestic trade, working as street peddlers, market

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[179] *Vente de douze negres et objets du peche par Le no.e F.s Janvier Latortue ainé N.L. aux Sr et D.e Maureau*, July 5, 1787.

[180] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 375, state that "[w]ith between 6,000 and 10,000 *livres* of disposable income, one would be considered on the threshold of prosperity. For a real fortune, it would be reasonable to count those individuals who could spend 80,000 *livres* annually, the average revenue of a sugar refinery in the 1780s."

[181] Marronnage database, accessed June 12, 2013, http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php ?type=annonce&id=5943.

vendors, or small shop owners.[182] Arriving in New Orleans, Sirnir would find a similar commercial scene from that of Cap Français and could easily transfer her marketing skills from Saint-Domingue to her new Louisiana home.

On the eve of the Revolution, François Maurau stood as a successful artisan in Cap Français, who could afford an entire fishing operation and whose skills as a tailor allowed him to accept an apprentice. Maurau and his wife, Françoise Ortigue owned at least thirteen slaves in the city and likely real estate as well. When tens of thousands of slaves revolted on plantations in the plains surrounding Le Cap in 1791, however, their lives changed irrevocably. Only fragments of the Maurau family's experience during the prolonged conflict come through in the archives. Evidence suggests that they remained in Cap Français (or perhaps left and returned) until the final evacuation of French troops from the colony in 1803.[183]

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[182] Rogers and King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, and Rentières," 365-366; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 262, 263; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 100; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 281-282; Virginia Gould, "Urban Slavery-Urban Freedom: The Manumission of Jacqueline Lemelle," in Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 303; Robert Olwell, " 'Loose, Idle and Disorderly:' Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace," in Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 99-100, 106.

[183] In the census taken of Le Cap in 1803, a tailor named François Moreau is listed on Notre Dame street and a Jean Moreau, *jeune* described as a *marchand* is listed on Vaudreuil street. *Recensement de la Ville du Cap An Onze*, G/1/496, DPPC, ANOM

Although I cannot be completely sure, I suspect that these are the Maurau brothers. The occupations match, and the apprenticeship agreement located François Maurau on Vaudreuil street. I have not seen Jean Maurau listed as *jeune* (junior) anywhere else, and in the wills he recorded in New Orleans, he said his father was "François Maurau." However, Jean also recorded a procuration act in New Orleans, in which he gave power of attorney to his brother, Pierre, (apparently another sibling) in France to manage their late father's estate. In this record his father's name is Jean. François Maurau's marriage record with Françoise Ortigue also gives his father's name as Jean. It is quite possible that the Maurau brothers' father had (and used) both names.

Additional evidence that the Mauraus remained in Cap Français during the Revolution is the announcement of the marriage between Anne Duplessis and Jean-Marie Donadieu published in the local newspaper on April 28, 1803. Duplessis was Françoise Ortigue's niece. Her mother, Marguerite Ortigue (Françoise's sister) is described in the announcement as a "*marchand*" and her father, Charles Duplessis was deceased. Because Anne was a minor, her mother gave her consent for the couple to marry, indicating that Marguerite was in Le Cap with her daughter. It is plausible that Françoise Ortigue would have remained in the city, if her sister's family was there as well. *Affiches Américaines de Saint-Domingue*, April 28, 1803, No. 34, page 140, accessed August 8, 2013, http://books.google.com/books?id =Tl9KAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

In the midst of the upheaval, they welcomed several new members to their family. Around 1789 François Maurau and Françoise Ortigue had another daughter named Marie Emelie, who grew up during the Revolution.[184] Marie Emelie apparently married at a rather young age because in 1804 she became the widow of Jean Monet or Monain.[185] She may have married around the same time as her cousin, Anne Duplessis, who wed Jean-Marie Donadieu in Le Cap in the spring of 1803.[186] At the end of the war, Marie Emelie fled to Cuba, and in 1809, she relocated to New Orleans, where she joined her uncle, Jean Maurau and his wife, along with Marie Justine Sirnir.[187]

It is unclear precisely when François' brother Jean arrived in Le Cap. He was likely younger than François and may have waited until his brother had fully settled in the colony before joining him there. Direct documentation of Jean Maurau in Saint-Domingue is very sparse, but records from New Orleans provide a few details about his time on the island. New Orleans documents frequently refer to Jean Maurau as a "*marchand*," and this is likely the type of position he held in Cap Français as well. A merchant dealing in the fabric trade, for instance, would complement François' tailor

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[184] Marie Emelie's baptism record has not been located. In a marriage contract recorded in New Orleans on February 27, 1823, she stated that she was about thirty-four years old and the legitimate daughter of Sieur François Moreau and Dame La Bonne Duchemin. This would place her birth around 1789. *Contrat de marriage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin*, February 7, 1823, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 10, page 146, NARC. In another marriage contract made in 1834, Marie Emelie refers to her mother as Françoise Duchemin. It is unclear why she does not refer to her mother by the surname Ortigue. Duchemin was the maiden name of Marie Emelie's mother. *Contrat de Mariage entre François Vausson et de Marie Emelie Maureau*, May 13, 1834, Acts of H. Pedesclaux, Volume 12, Act, 205, page 421, NARC.

[185] *Contrat de marriage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin*, February 7, 1823.The last name of Marie Emelie's first husband is spelled various ways in documents, including Moné, Monet, Monnin, and Monain.

[186] *Affiches Américaines de Saint-Domingue*, April 28, 1803, No. 34, page 140, accessed August 8, 2013, http://books.google.com/books?id=Tl9KAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s. Anne Duplessis was the daughter of Marie Emelie's maternal aunt, Marguerite Ortigue, and the late Charles Duplessis. Donadieu was described as a French native and a shopkeeper in the wedding announcement published in the local newspaper, *Affiches Américaines de Saint-Domingue*.

[187] *Contrat de marriage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin*, February 7, 1823.

business well. Jean also owned slaves in New Orleans, and in the immediate years following his arrival there, he acted as a minor slave trader. This suggests that Maurau had previous experience negotiating an urban slave society to his advantage—buying and selling enslaved individuals, utilizing their labor, and investing in this type of property for financial gains. In either 1798 or 1800, Jean Maurau married a free woman of color named Marie Antoinette Eugenie Monmartin in Le Cap. Monmartin was born in the city around 1778 to Genevieve Monmartin. Jean and Eugenie remained in Cap Français until the French army was defeated in 1803. By May 1804, the couple was living New Orleans.[188]

Even less is known about Marie Justine Simir's experience during the war, although she most likely remained in Cap Français, as well. With Celestin in the possession of François Maurau, Simir had a compelling reason to keep in contact with the Maurau family in order to be near her son. This same motivation likely spurred Simir's decision to leave the island at the conclusion of the conflict. Whether she traveled to New Orleans with Jean Maurau and Eugenie Monmartin or separately, Marie Justine Simir quickly reconnected with the couple in the city.

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[188] *Enregisant de son testament*, June 27, 1818, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 12, page 328, NARC; *Testament par Jean Maureau*, January 4, 1819, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 15, Book 2 Probate Matters/Book 3 Miscellaneous Acts, page 3D, NARC; *Testament par Jean Maureau*, August 12, 1819, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 15, Book 2 Probate Matters/Book 3 Miscellaneous Acts, page 57A, NARC; *Recensement de la Ville du Cap An Onze*, G/1/496, DPPC, ANOM; [Slave Sale between Jean Maurau and Pedro de Torres], November 15, 1805, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 48, page 1081, NARC. In her will recorded in New Orleans, Eugenie Monmartin gave the date of 1798 for her marriage to Jean Maurau. In two testaments recorded in 1819, Maurau claimed he married his wife in 1800. The earliest document involving the Mauraus in New Orleans that I have located dates from November 15, 1804, but it references an earlier transaction Jean Maurau made in May of that same year.

Life during Wartime

The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 as a massive slave insurrection on the northern plain outside of Le Cap and ended with the declaration of the independent nation of Haiti in 1804. For thirteen years, the colony was engulfed in a series of violent conflicts, involving varying divisions and alliances among its three social groups—slaves, free people of color, and whites—as well as French, British, and Spanish forces. Events on the island unfolded in close connection with the simultaneous upheaval in France, and political decisions and actions on both sides of the Atlantic significantly affected one another. Fighting occurred in all three of the colony's provinces, but the political situation varied by place and time.[189] While a full treatment of the Revolution is beyond the scope of this chapter, a focus on the events that directly affected Cap Français provides a context for imagining how Marie Justine Sirnir and the Mauraus lived through the war that ultimately destroyed slavery and created the first black republic in the New World.

The earliest incidences of agitation in Saint-Domingue occurred in 1789 and 1791, as both white colonists and free people of color reacted to the revolutionary events taking place in the metropole. White supporters of the French Revolution clamored for seats in the newly-created National Assembly in order to protect their position as slave owners and expand their control of the colony's governance. Free people of color viewed the National Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen made on August 26, 1789 as an opening to obtain the political rights denied them in Saint-Domingue. The

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[189] Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 12; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 11-12; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 1, 3-4; Popkin, *Concise History*, 1, 5; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 19, 38-39, 376-377.

colonies were granted the authority to create their own assemblies in March 1790, which white leaders immediately construed it to exclude free blacks from participation. In October of that year, Vincent Ogé, one of the wealthiest free men of color in Le Cap, directly challenged these exclusionary measures. Recently returned from Paris, Ogé attempted to force the white population to extend the Rights of Man tenets of equality and citizenship to the free black population through an armed rebellion. His small band of followers was quickly overpowered, however. Colonial authorities publicly executed Ogé and twenty of his supporters in Cap Français. To discourage further defiance, they broke Ogé on the wheel and displayed his head on a pole.[190]

Despite its failure, Ogé's rebellion had several important consequences. In France, news of the brutal retaliation against Ogé and his followers brought debates between pro- and anti-slavery factions to the foreground of the National Assembly's constitutional convention. The result was the passage of an amendment on May 15, 1791 that provided political rights to free men of color whose parents were free. While this pertained to only a small proportion of the colony's free black population, white Saint-Dominguans vehemently refused to accept the decree, prompting the National Assembly to send a Civil Commission to enforce the law. In Le Cap, "the agitation was extreme," according one newspaper account. Yet, political actions in revolutionary France moved much more quickly than news did across the ocean. By the time the first set of Commissioners arrived in the Caribbean, the May 15 amendment had been reversed and the National Assembly had been dissolved.[191]

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[190] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 35-36, 71-72; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 87-88; Popkin, *Concise History*, 27-30, 32-33.

[191] Popkin, *Concise History*, 32-34; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 36-38, quote on 72; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 88-89.

On the island, tensions between whites and free people of color increased dramatically after Ogé's execution. White colonists were faced with the knowledge that the free black population was willing to use violence to fight the restrictions placed on them, while free people of color recognized that whites were wholly unprepared to share their political power. This realization inspired 600 free men of color in the South to take up arms in late 1790, followed by a movement of free colored men in the West in August 1791. Free people of color in Cap Français did not openly support Ogé in his cause, but they understood both what his challenge represented as well the meaning of his ruthless execution. While public displays of violence were not novel events in Le Cap, the brutal treatment of "one of the most successful and respected members of their group" was certainly traumatizing for the city's residents of color to witness.[192]

Saint-Domingue's enslaved population was not immune to these developments. They took note of their masters' preoccupation with the political events of France and the obvious discord the metropole's policies had created between whites and free blacks. On August 22, 1791, they took action. Led by a group of *commandeurs* and coachmen, enslaved men and women on plantations across the North orchestrated a large-scale revolt that took their masters and mistresses by surprise and put into motion a revolution. The insurrection began in Acul parish, located about ten miles from Le Cap, and quickly spread to neighboring Limbé. A troop of slaves, gathering force as it went, moved from plantation to plantation, burning the cane fields, destroying buildings and machinery, and killing the white inhabitants. Although some masters and plantation managers attempted to fight back, for the most part, whites were too shocked to take action and panic ensued.

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[192] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 36, quote on 72; Popkin, *Concise History*, 32, 40-41; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 88, 119-120; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 248-250.

Within only a few days, the *Plaine du Nord* was devastated by fires and controlled by the insurgents. By the end of September, thousands of plantations had been destroyed and an estimated 20,000 or more slaves had joined the rebel camps along the plain.[193]

Initial news of the revolt brought panic to Cap Français as well. Fortifications quickly went up to protect the city and ships were forced to remain in the harbor, in case the sailors were needed in an attack. Race relations were tense. Many whites blamed free people of color for inciting the slave rebellion, and flare-ups of violence between the two groups occurred. Fear of the city's 10,000 enslaved inhabitants caused even more anxiety among whites. Their presence provoked some slave owners to take extreme precautions such as jailing their slaves on boats in the harbor. The influx of survivors from the plain, including some slaves who accompanied their masters, exacerbated the situation. Yet, once it became clear that Cap Français would not be overrun by insurgents, it "settled into the routine of a city under siege."[194]

It is impossible to know how Marie Justine Sirnir felt about the slave uprising and the upheaval it unleashed. Her status at the time likely made a difference in how she viewed the events occurring throughout the North, but whether she was free or enslaved in 1791, Sirnir certainly experienced the effects of the current situation on her daily life. Her movements were likely restricted, particularly if she was a slave, as they were not allowed to "circulate in the town without a pass from their masters."[195] With the surrounding plantations in ruins, business in the city basically ceased which surely

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[193] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 94-95, 97, 113; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 96-100, 105-106; Popkin, *Concise History*, 37-38; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 73. The estimated number of slaves involved in the insurrection fluctuated greatly. Dubois suggests that by the end of September, there were at least 20,000 people in the insurgent camps, although some sources place the number as high as 80,000. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 113 and Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 106.

[194] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 73-75, quote on 75; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 96.

[195] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 75.

affected those individuals who made their livelihood from retail trade. If Sirnir was free by this time, her son, Celestin, was still owned by François Maurau. The insurrection's effect on Le Cap's residents likely strained whatever relationship Sirnir may have had with the Mauraus. Possibly Maurau had a similar reaction to his slaves as another Le Cap merchant, who explained: "I had Aza and Zamor put in the jail, both out of suspicion and to protect them from the fury of our troops; I nearly did the same with Françoise, who permitted herself some insolence; the epidemic has spread to all those folks, and it is clear that they are all criminals."[196]

Despite their fears, slave owners in Le Cap managed to keep their slaves under control for the first two years of the Revolution. Even as armed skirmishes broke out periodically between white and free men of color, the city's enslaved population remained neutral. This, however, would dramatically change in June 1793 when the newly-arrived French Governor-General clashed with the second set of civil commissioners sent the previous year. In a turn of events that few could have predicted, that violent altercation left Cap Français in ashes, most of the city's white residents on ships headed to the United States, and the enslaved inhabitants officially free.[197]

By the close of 1791, the North department was at an impasse. The black insurgents controlled the area surrounding Le Cap but they could not advance on the city. The colonial authorities assembled there continued to deny free men of color any concessions, unlike their counterparts in the West who had signed treaties with the groups of free men of color who had undertaken their own rebellion in August 1791. Meanwhile in France, the National Assembly had been replaced with the Legislative Assembly,

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[196] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 74.
[197] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 2-3, 77, 82-84, 85, 117-119.

whose more radical leaders refused to send military aid to Saint-Domingue unless authorities there granted equal rights to free men of color. On April 4, 1792 the Assembly passed a ruling that did just that. It then dispatched a second Civil Commission to the island with orders to enforce the April 4 decree, dismantle the local assemblies and replace them with elected councils that included white and free men of color, and end the slave rebellion.[198]

The commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, arrived in Le Cap in September 1792, along with 6,000 French troops.[199] By this time, France had been declared a republic, following the overthrow of the constitutional monarchy. The Legislative Assembly, which authorized the Civil Commission, was replaced by the National Convention. Republican supporters in Saint-Domingue followed suit, forcing the ouster of individuals in royal-appointed positions. Sonthonax and Polverel succeeded in dissolving the Colonial Assembly and setting up a provisional board in its place, but when they attempted to implement the law of April 4, whites in Cap Français violently resisted. The commissioners looked to free men of color for armed support. Not only did these men have the desire to fight for racial equality, many of them had extensive military experience from having served in the colony's free black militia. Predictably, this decision did not win Sonthonax and Polverel many white supporters.[200]

By January of 1793, the commissioners were able to turn their focus on the slave insurgents. They sent out a military campaign that had some success but not enough to

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[198] Popkin, *Concise History*, 40-41, 45, 47-48, 52; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 76, 81, 85-86; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 119-120, 130-131.

[199] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 86-88. A third civil commissioner, Jean-Antoine Ailhaud, did not remain in the colony for long.

[200] Popkin, *Concise History*, 53; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 97, 105-106, 112-117, 119-120, 125, 200; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 143-147.

crush the rebellion. News that France had declared war on Great Britain and Spain, however, diverted the commissioners' attention from the slave insurrectionists. Worried about invasions from Santo-Domingo or Jamaica, Sonthonax and Polverel concentrated on stamping out white resistance to their policies before those colonists colluded with the enemy in exchange for a guarantee that slavery would be preserved. Yet, slaveholders were not the only ones being courted by France's rivals. Across the border in Santo-Domingo, Spain offered the slave insurgents freedom if they agreed to fight against the French in the name of the Spanish monarchy. Reluctant to offer emancipation, Sonthonax and Polverel hoped instead that a commitment to enforcing the Code Noir would be enough to convince the slaves to lay down their arms. The commissioners officially reestablished the Code on May 5, 1793.[201]

Two days later, General Thomas Galbaud arrived in Cap Français to serve as the colony's new governor. Sonthonax and Polverel were away from the city, and Galbaud began making decisions in their absence. To the consternation of the commissioners and their free black supporters, Galbaud was welcomed by the city's white inhabitants and the numerous French sailors that had been cooped up in the harbor. Unable to sail for fear of an attack by the British navy, the sailors often took their frustrations out on free men of color on shore. The commissioners returned to the Le Cap in June, reproached Galbaud for his behavior, and convinced him to return to France. They placed Galbaud on a ship in the harbor, where the sailors on board convinced him to lead a revolt against the commissioners.[202]

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[201] Popkin, *Concise History*, 54-55; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 124, 127, 136, 142; Dubois, 147-149, 152-155.

[202] Popkin, *Concise History*, 56-57; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 150-151, 153-154, 168, 176, 179, 187; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 155-156.

Galbaud and his naval supporters attacked the Government House on the afternoon of June 20. Although a few white colonists joined the sailors, most residents nervously remained in their homes. The commissioners turned to free men of color for defense, and they successfully held off Galbaud's group, which suffered from internal disorganization. In spite of this setback, the sailors managed to secure the city's arsenal and readied for a second assault on June 21. The commissioners and their free colored allies faced a now heavily armed opponent that clearly outnumbered them. The enslaved population—those in Le Cap as well as the insurgents camped in the northern plain—remained the only source for manpower which Sonthonax and Polverel could tap.[203] In a proclamation printed on June 21, the commissioners offered liberty to any male slave that agreed to fight for the French Republic "against the Spanish and against other enemies, whether interior or exterior."[204] As Jeremy Popkin argues, this decision formed a crucial turning point in the Haitian Revolution and more broadly in the history of slavery and abolition. He writes, "Having opened the doors to mass emancipation, Sonthonax and Polverel would soon find themselves compelled to let ever-increasing numbers of slaves pass through it; within four months, they would have decreed the complete abolition of slavery in the colony."[205]

The night of June 20 was "troubled: from every direction one heard gunshots and cries."[206] Rumors of destruction spread through the town, and both sailors and slaves took advantage of the disorder to loot stores and houses during the night. On the morning of June 21, Galbaud organized his troops and headed towards the Government house with a

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[203] Popkin, *Concise History*, 57; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 196, 199-208, 210-212; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 156-157.
[204] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 212.
[205] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 213.
[206] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 214.

large cannon. The commissioners fled to safety, taking refuge in Haut-du-Cap, a small town a few miles outside of the city. By this time, chaos had engulfed Le Cap. Although Galbaud's forces could have taken the town, they instead panicked at the thought of hordes of insurgents sweeping down from the camps. Galbaud and his men retreated to the harbor to return to the ships as quickly as possible. Many of the city's white residents followed suit.[207] One colonial administrator wrote, "From all sides came cries of 'To the ships! To the ships!' and fear had seized all the citizens. Continual fire from the upper windows of the buildings, armed blacks who we recognized, everything increased the terror and the unfortunate city was immediately abandoned and left to be looted."[208] In fact, several thousand insurgents did agree to fight for the French in return for their freedom, but they did not descend into the city until June 22.[209]

At some point on June 21, a fire broke out and quickly spread through the town.[210] With the city in flames, even more looting occurred. One witness explained that "[l]ooting preceded the ravages of the destructive element and, in the lower town, the sailors themselves did what the colored brigands did in the upper part. The disorder was at its peak, it was universal."[211] The blaze also encouraged more residents to flee. Grabbing whatever they could salvage, whites, along with some free people of color and slaves headed for the harbor. Those who lived in the upper part of town and could not reach the water, escaped to Haut-du-Cap.[212] Residents who fled the city in ships bound

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[207] Popkin, *Concise History*, 57-58; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 214-215, 218-223, 228; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 159.

[208] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 221.

[209] Popkin, *Concise History*, 57-58; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 234.

[210] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 229.

[211] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 230.

[212] Popkin, *Concise History*, 58; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 231, 234; H. D. de Saint-Maurice, "Récit historique du malheureux événement qui a réduit en cendres la ville due Cap français, capital de la province

for eastern coast of the United States often referred to the conflagration in documents they recorded soon after landing. When Dr. Ferrié arrived in Baltimore he recorded a declaration with the French consulate on July 25, 1793, in which he explained that he was "forced to flee Le Cap which was in flames and take refuge on a ship to escape from the daggers of the assassins."[213]

When the fires subsided several days later, about eighty-five percent of the city was burned. Only the Petit-Carénage neighborhood where Jeanette Azulima resided remained intact. A 1795 map of the city indicating the extent of the destruction shows most of Vaudreuil street was consumed.[214] If the Mauraus still lived on Vaudreuil, they likely lost their home. It can be assumed that the family attempted to escape in the midst of the turmoil, but whether they ran to the harbor or fled to the plain above the city remains unknown. Sirnir may have accompanied them, especially if they took Celestin along. Stories from survivors reveal that people of African descent often aided whites in navigating the violence to escape to safety. Sometimes these individuals were the slaves or former slaves of those they assisted, but others helped strangers. In many cases, the rescuer of color convinced would-be attackers that the white person in question deserved to escape.[215] In what was surely a bewildering inversion of racial relations to them, whites found that they needed black people to vouch for their character in order to move safely through town. Sirnir may have acted in this capacity for the Mauraus, assisting in their survival of the crisis.

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du Nord, colonie de St. Domingue," in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Popkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 197.

[213] *Déclaration Mr Ferrié*, No. 18, July 25, 1793, in Consulats américaines, 6SUPSDOM-6, ANOM.

[214] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 240; *Plan du Cap Français après son incendie du 20 Juin 1793*, printed in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 241; original in Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[215] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 224-227.

On June 24, the ships in the harbor, now filled with residents of Le Cap, departed. Most headed to ports along the United States' East Coast, including Charleston, Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people left at this time.[216] The majority of these refugees were white men, women, and children, but some free people of color and slaves also made it onboard. Most of the people of African descent who emigrated at this time were women. One report made in Philadelphia stated that "all the whites, the free women of color and a number of black slaves from Le Cap tried to escape." Sailors, however, attempted to limit the passengers to white residents only. The report went on to explain that "when the ships finally sailed, most of the women of color and the blacks who had taken refuge on them were cruelly sent back to shore."[217]

While it is clear that at least some members of the Maurau family lived in Le Cap when the French troops evacuated the city in 1803, it is possible that they left in 1793 and returned at a later time. In the chaos unleashed by Galbaud's attack, families were often split up.[218] Perhaps Françoise Ortigue and Marie Emelie left, while François and his brother, Jean, remained in the city. If this was the case, Ortigue may have taken the ten-year-old Celestin with her but left Marie Justine behind. A request Sirnir made in her 1812 testament supports this as a plausible scenario. Naming Jean Maurau as her universal legatee, she asked that he locate "the heirs of Mr. François Moreau," purchase Celestin, and free him. She added that she had not had contact with Celestin for twenty

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[216] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 289, 291, 293. Other sources give estimates as high as 10,000 people. In the months following the burning of Le Cap, more people departed from Saint-Domingue. See Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans,* 12; Popkin, 291.

[217] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 232.

[218] See, for example, Anonymous, "Mon Odyssée," in *Facing Racial Revolution*, 216-217.

years.[219] Marie Justine's entreaty to Maurau to find and free her son indicates that she lost contact with Celestin around 1792 and that she believed him to be with François Maurau's "heirs." Thus, it is possible that Marie Justine and her son were separated by the departure of the Mauraus from Cap Français in June 1793.

For those white colonists who did not flee, the aftermath of the crisis of June 20-24 demonstrated that society as they knew it had completely changed. Le Cap—now inhabited almost entirely by free people of color, the city's slaves, and a large number of insurgents from the countryside— lay in ruins and the streets were strewn with bodies.[220] Yet, for most enslaved individuals things had not changed quite enough. Although Sonthonax and Polverel had freed some enslaved men who were willing to fight for the French, the scope of their decree remained severely limited. The large number of enslaved women in Cap Français, for example, did not gain anything from the June 21 proclamation. Moreover, the commissioners' bid to save the city through enrolling the insurgents into the French army proved unsuccessful. Most of the insurgents camped throughout the North refused the offer, opting to remain loyal to the Spanish. As Sonthonax and Polverel attempted to restore order to Le Cap, it became clear that more concessions were necessary to maintain their control.[221]

Over the course of the next few months, the commissioners enacted a piecemeal process of emancipation. As Popkin convincingly argues, Sonthonax and Polverel's decisions concerning the abolition of slavery were less about their republican principles and more about "the circumstances in which they found themselves, and above all by

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[219] *Testament de Marie Justine Sirnir*. Sirnir's request for Jean Maurau to find and free Celestin will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

[220] Popkin, *Concise History*, 58; Popkin, *You Are All Free,* 242-244. An estimated 3,000 people died between June 20 and June 25. Most of those casualties were blacks.

[221] Popkin, *Concise History*, 59; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 147, 248-253; Dubois, 159-161.

pressure from a black population that was now in a position to demand a better bargain than before the June crisis."[222] On July 11, Sonthonax extended liberty to the wives and children of men who agreed to fight for the French. On August 29, he declared all of the slaves in the North free, although he also outlined a detailed plan that kept former slaves working as paid laborers on plantations. Meanwhile, Polverel traveled to the West and South and followed a similar pattern of gradual emancipation until October 31, 1793 when he, too, declared the end of slavery in the two provinces.[223]

In order for the commissioners' general emancipation decree to become official French law, it had to be ratified by the National Convention. After much difficulty, a delegation of three representatives from the colony—a white man, a free man of color, and a formerly enslaved black man—arrived in Paris on January 23, 1794. They presented their case to the members of the National Convention on February 4, and the Convention agreed to abolish slavery in all French colonies. If Marie Justine Sirnir remained enslaved up until this point, she officially became a free woman on February 4, 1794. The decree of pluviôse 16 An II, as it was dated in the French Republican calendar, went beyond general emancipation, however. It also granted full citizenship rights to all men of African descent living in France's territories. The law stayed in effect for the next eight years, at which point Napoleon repealed it. Until that time the French empire was a place in which the institution of slavery ceased to exist and racial equality became a reality.[224]

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[222] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 248.

[223] Popkin, *Concise History*, 59-60; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 248, 260, 269, 278; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 160-164.

[224] Popkin, *Concise History*, 66-67; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 327, 354, 362, 377; Dubois, 168-170.

Yet, the conflict in Saint-Domingue was far from over. As Sonthonax and Polverel focused on emancipation and continued to try to woo the mass of black soldiers away from the Spanish, British troops took control of the northwestern point at Môle Saint-Nicolas, the southwestern point at Jérémie and much of the West. Meanwhile, the Spanish, with the help of their insurgent allies, occupied territory in the northern plain and the western border. Ultimately, neither the British nor the Spanish had much success in conquering more territory. This was due, in significant part, by Toussaint Louverture's decision to change his loyalty from Spain to France in May 1794. The following month, Sonthonax and Polverel returned to Paris, having been officially recalled by the National Convention months earlier. French General Etienne Laveaux assumed the role of governor of the colony.[225]

Toussaint Louverture's move to fight for the French was a decisive moment in the Haitian Revolution. The son of an enslaved "Arada" man, Louverture had gained his freedom long before the insurrection. By 1793 he had reached a leadership position among the insurgent bands, and his change in allegiance to France brought around 4,000 troops to Laveaux's side. Toussaint was a skilled military leader and shrewd politician. Through careful maneuvering, he successfully consolidated his power against his rivals—white and black, alike. Louverture eventually defeated the British, rid the island of all French administrators, fought off challenges to his position of power from other black commanders, and declared himself Governor-General of the colony.[226]

The solidification of Louverture's control of Saint-Domingue took place between 1798 and 1801. With the evacuation of the British troops from the island in 1798, the

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[225] Popkin, *Concise History*, 63-64, 67, 69; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 166-168.
[226] Popkin, *Concise History*, 63-64, 69-71, 90; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 171-173.

threat of a foreign takeover ended. While his main focus remained on the military front, Louverture also began to rebuild the colony's society and economy. He was determined to restart plantation production but stood firmly by the continued abolition of slavery. Louverture envisioned a multiracial society in which whites and people of African descent, as equal citizens, worked together to return Saint-Domingue to its dominance in sugar and coffee production. To do this, he encouraged white colonists to return to their plantations, doled out abandoned lands to former slaves and free men of color, many of whom were his military officers, and created strict regulations for plantation workers, now called *cultivateurs*.[227] The final internal challenge to Louverture's authority came in 1799 from André Rigaud, a commander in the South who represented the "mulatto elite." Rigaud's men attacked Louverture's troops in Petit-Goâve and the fighting continued in the South until the summer of 1800. Known as the "War of Knives," this conflict left thousands of people dead. Many of these casualties were civilians in Jacmel who succumbed to starvation when the port was cut off from supplies.[228]

By 1800, Toussaint Louverture had defeated his rivals for control of the colony, but he continued to be plagued by the difficulty of forcing plantation workers to abide by his harsh labor codes. For formerly enslaved men and women who lived and worked on plantations, maintaining their freedom was a constant battle between Louverture's desire to keep the plantation economy afloat and the *cultivateurs*' determination to live on their own terms. Like Sonthonax and Polverel before him, Louverture quickly discovered that most former slaves' idea of liberty was "the freedom to possess and to till their own soil, to labor for themselves and their families, with no constraints other than their own self-

[227] Popkin, *Concise History*, 72, 83, 85, 88, 98-99; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 184, 187-189, 192, 226-227.
[228] Popkin, *Concise History*, quote on 96, 97; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 232-236.

defined needs, and to sell or dispose of the products of their labor in their own interest."[229] While a large number of able-bodied men joined the military, many women, children, and older men formed villages and cultivated small subsistence farms when they had the opportunity. Plantation workers continued to rebel against Louverture's labor regulations. An uprising occurred in the northern plain in 1801 that led to the General's brutal execution of one his military officers who showed sympathy to the *cultivateurs*' plight.[230]

Following his successful defeat of Rigaud, Toussaint Louverture had reached the height of his power. The situation in France, however, had shifted once again. While Louverture and Rigaud engaged in what amounted to a civil war, Napoleon Bonaparte successfully overthrew the French Directory on 18 brumaire An VIII (November 9, 1799).[231] Although Napoleon confirmed Louverture's authority in Saint-Domingue and promised to uphold the abolition of slavery, Louverture remained wary of his true intentions. The concern was mutual, and Louverture's subsequent actions proved too threatening to Napoleon to allow him to remain in power. In early 1800 Louverture easily conquered neighboring Santo-Domingo, albeit against Napoleon's explicit instructions to the contrary. Then, in 1801 Louverture named himself Governor-General for life when he created a new constitution for the colony that fell just short of claiming Saint-Domingue's independence from France. This final affront to Napoleon's authority pushed him to send an army to retake control of the colony from Louverture.[232]

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[229] Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 180.

[230] Popkin, *Concise History*, 85-86, 99, 103-104, 112, 121; Dubois, 238-240, 247; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 207-209.

[231] Popkin, *Concise History*, 98, 106; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 207; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 378. The Directory replaced the National Convention as Republican France's governing body in 1795.

[232] Popkin, *Concise History*, 105-111; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 253-254.

Determining what the daily existence was like for the residents of Saint-Domingue during Louverture's rise to power is difficult, especially for those who continued to inhabit urban areas like Le Cap. Overall, life in the colony between the period between 1794 and 1802 became more stable and rebuilding did occur. In Cap Français, almost half of the structures burned in 1793 had been rebuilt by 1797. As an incentive to rebuild, the city's administration allowed anyone who reconstructed a house to live there for three years. The original owner could then purchase the property or the state appropriated it.[233] If the Mauraus evacuated Le Cap in 1793, they may well have returned at this point and taken advantage of the reconstruction regulations. Marie Justine Sirnir could have also benefited from the rebuilding of Le Cap. According to one inhabitant, numerous buildings had been restored in 1798, but "[t]here are not even enough tenants to occupy them."[234] Commerce also returned to the port, as Louverture reached out to American traders. The city's inhabitants clearly found ways to continue on with their lives. In 1798 or 1800, Jean Maurau married Marie Antoinette Eugenie Monmartin. His niece, Marie Emelie Maurau, also found a spouse before the end of the war, but her marriage was cut short by the death of her husband in 1804.[235]

If life in Le Cap had assumed enough of a return to normalcy in 1800 for couples to bond their futures together through marriage vows, in a mere two years the city was once again destroyed. The fragile society Toussaint Louverture created out of the war-torn colony of Saint-Domingue began to unravel with the arrival of Napoleon's

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[233] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 391-393; Popkin, *Concise History*, 62.

[234] Quoted in Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 391. This could be how the François Maurau acquired the Notre Dame property at which he is listed in the 1803 census.

[235] Popkin, You Are All Free, 393; *Enregisant de son testament*, June 27, 1818; *Testament par Jean Maureau*, January 4, 1819; *Testament par Jean Maureau,* August 12, 1819; *Contrat de marriage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin*, February 7, 1823.

expeditionary troops in February 1802. Under the command of Napoleon's brother-in-law General Charles Victor-Emmanuel Leclerc, 20,000 French soldiers landed in the colony with instructions to depose Louverture, arrest and deport his officers, and disarm the rest of the population. This large force met with strong resistance from Louverture's army upon arrival. When the naval ships entered Le Cap's harbor, they were not permitted to dock. Henri Christophe, the commanding officer of Louverture's troops in the city, declared, "You will enter the town of Le Cap only once it has been reduced to ashes, and even on these ashes I will fight you." When the French ignored Christophe's threat, he burned the city, setting his own house on fire first, and retreated to the plain.[236]

General Leclerc set up base in Le Cap after Christophe abandoned it to the flames and the city began to rebuild once again. A number of white colonists returned to the city from the countryside as well as France and the United States. Although the plains around Le Cap remained in the hands of the black soldiers, the city itself remained calm.[237] A Philadelphia native who lived there between 1802 and 1803 described the attitude of the white creoles who "think it impossible that this island can ever be abandoned to the negroes. They build houses, rebuild those that were burned, and seem secure in their possessions."[238] For a time, whites in Le Cap had a reason to feel hopeful. Despite the fierce fighting that took place during the first few months of their arrival, the French troops began to make some headway. By May, Louverture's officers, including Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines (who would both play critical roles in the final

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[236] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 393; Popkin, *Concise History*, 118-119, 122-123; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 254, 263-266, quoted on 264.

[237] Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 393-394.

[238] Leonora Sansay, *Secret History; Or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, ed. Michael Dexler (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2007), 92. Sansay first wrote of her experiences in Le Cap between 1802 and 1803 in a letter to Aaron Burr. She then fictionalized her account in the novel *Secret History; Or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*.

fight for independence a few months later) had capitulated to Leclerc. The following month, Toussaint Louverture was captured and sent to France.[239]

Napoleon, feeling confident that Leclerc's efforts to retake Saint-Domingue would prove successful, reinstated slavery in France's colonies on May 10, 1802. News of Napoleon's repeal of the 1794 decree arrived in Saint-Domingue by August. The law did not explicitly include Saint-Domingue, but the threat of re-enslavement—a persistent rumor all along—galvanized the black and colored officers to turn against Leclerc.[240] The General complained to Napoleon: "Every day the party of the insurrection grows and mine diminishes, because of the losses among the whites and the desertions among the blacks."[241] French soldiers succumbed to the guerilla tactics of the black soldiers as well as yellow fever. Leclerc perished from the disease in November 1802. He was succeeded by General Rochambeau, whose ruthless policies only served to further unite black and colored officers in a fight against the French.[242]

By spring of 1803, Jean-Jacques Dessalines commanded the "indigenous army" made up of black and mixed-race officers and their troops. Throughout much of the conflict over the past twelve years, these two groups had different goals and often vied with one another for power. Now they shared a common objective—to rid the island once and for all of the French. Under intense attack on the island, Rochambeau needed more manpower and supplies. In May, however, France and Great Britain had returned to war with one another. The British navy blockaded the Caribbean, effectively cutting off French reinforcements to Saint-Domingue. Rochambeau began to withdraw his troops in

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[239] Popkin, *Concise History*, 125-126; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 275-278.
[240] Popkin, *Concise History*, 128-129; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 42.
[241] Quoted in Popkin, *Concise History*, 129.
[242] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 292-293.

the summer of 1803, maintaining his focus on Port-au-Prince and Cap Français. The French army evacuated the capital on October 3. Following a decisive defeat in Vertières, near Le Cap, Rochambeau finally surrendered to Dessalines on November 18.[243] The departure of the French army from Saint-Domingue's port cities caused a mass exodus of whites, along with numerous people of African descent from the island. Many of these emigrants traveled to nearby Cuba, while others ended up in the United States.[244] Marie Emelie Maurau relocated to Santiago de Cuba. It is unclear if she traveled alone or was accompanied by her parents. Jean Maurau and his wife, Eugenie, as well as Marie Justine Simir made their way to New Orleans.

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence for the former French colony of Saint-Domingue and named the new nation Haiti. In an earlier proclamation, the leaders of the indigenous army suggested that they would allow white property owners to return. However, in the January 1 declaration, Dessalines made clear that white inhabitants were no longer welcome on the island. In February and March, soldiers undertook a mass killing of the remaining white people in the country. Following the executions, Dessalines proclaimed, "We have given these true cannibals war for war, crimes for crimes, outrages for outrages. Yes, I have saved my country, I have avenged America."[245]

One of the victims of the massacre was Jean Monet, the husband of Marie Emelie Maurau. Apparently Monet did not leave Le Cap for Cuba with his wife. When she wed her second husband, Antoine Besset in New Orleans in 1823, the marriage contract stated

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[243] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 293-294, 297-298; Popkin, *Concise History*, 131-134.
[244] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 14-15, 24; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 297-298.
[245] Popkin, *Concise History*, 135, quoted on 137.

that her former marriage was "dissolved in 1804 by the assassination of her first husband."[246] Surviving wives like Marie Emelie sometimes recorded documents in refugee locales that describe their husbands' fate. On October 2, 1805, Marie Rose Boé St. Martin deposited a document with the French consulate in Baltimore, in which she declared: "That by the unhappy events arrived at Saint-Domingue, by the effect of the general massacre which had been in place by the Brigands, who have inhumanely exercised their cruelties on all the white colonists regardless of age and of sex: and in which said massacre the said late Sieur Jean Hughes Molinery has been one of the victims on February 19, 1804, I was forced to escape from their deadly irons and to flee and leave my country and properties which I possess and take refuge in Baltimore[,] my present residence[,] together with my daughter Madelaine Augustine."[247] Marie Emelie may have also attempted to stay with her husband in Le Cap and then escaped to Cuba, following his death.

Jean Monet's motivation to remain on the island is unknown, but he possibly had difficulty procuring a passport to leave. George Paulin, one of a few individuals who managed to escape the executions in the South, explained that he was unable to evacuate Les Cayes with the French troops because he was ill at the time, as were his wife and daughters. Paulin recorded a declaration in Baltimore on August 16, 1804, in which he described his survival and subsequent flight from Haiti. When Paulin's family recovered from their illness they were unable to obtain passports from Dessalines, who refused to

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[246] *Contrat de marriage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin*, February 7, 1823.

[247] *Dépôt Marie Rose Boé St. Martin* , No. 6, October 2, 1805, Consulats américaines, 6SUPSDOM-6, ANOM.

grant any white people permission to leave.[248] According to Paulin, Dessalines arrived in Les Cayes "on the fourteenth or fifteenth of February" and "the massacre of the French whites began." Paulin hid for over two weeks to avoid "death which was inevitable." On February 28, he emerged from hiding and fled the island at "two o'clock in the morning by the assistance of a black man named Jacob" who used his canoe to take Paulin to an American ship. Unfortunately, the ship set sail before Paulin could board, but he was able to get on a Danish boat bound for St. Thomas, where he landed on March 9. A few months later, Paulin arrived in Baltimore where he was able to record his declaration with the French consulate. Unlike Monet, Paulin's life had been saved. To make a successful escape, however, he was forced to leave behind everything—"my wife, my children, my house, furniture, land, effects and all of my papers."[249]

The Haitian Revolution held different meanings for refugees like George Paulin, Marie Emelie Maurau, and Marie Justine Sirnir, but it produced similar experiences of loss, upheaval, and dislocation. As the newly-created Haitian people began the process of building a nation, tens of thousands of former inhabitants of Saint-Domingue found themselves scattered throughout the Atlantic World. Attempting to rebuild their lives, these white, black, and colored émigrés often looked to fellow refugees for support. Indeed, for women like Marie Justine Sirnir, the decision to leave or remain on the war-torn former colony was often informed by complex relationships. Embarking to an unknown future in Louisiana was also a calculated risk, for while the Revolution

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[248] *Déclaration Mr. George Paulin*, No. 20, August 16, 1804, Consulats américaines, 6SUPSDOM-6, ANOM. Leonora Sansay also described the difficulty in obtaining passports for white men to leave Saint-Domingue at the conclusion of the war in her novel, *Secret History*. See Sansay, *Secret History*, 105. For another account of a survivor of the executions in Jérémie see the excerpt of Peter S. Chazotte's *Historical Sketches of the Revolutions and the Foreign and Civil Wars in the Island of St. Domingo* (originally published in 1840) in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 345-362.

[249] All quotes from *Déclaration Mr. George Paulin*, August 16, 1804.

shattered the institution that defined Sirnir as a piece of property for much of her life, her status as a free woman was not guaranteed once she left the island.

CHAPTER THREE
"Inhabitant of Saint-Domingue, today refugee in this place"

I institute for my universal legatee in all the surplus of my moveable and immoveable property, Mr. Jean Moreau, shopkeeper in this city to enjoy and dispose of the things belonging to him in full ownership as he sees fit from the day of my death, under the condition that as soon as the heirs of Mr. François Moreau make themselves known, he will buy my son Celestin and give him his freedom in accordance with the laws in use in the country where he is found at that time[;] my said son of whom there are twenty years that I have not heard from him.

- Testament of Marie Justine Sirnir, October 26, 1812

Approximately forty years after a slave ship carried her as little girl to Saint-Domingue, Marie Justine Sirnir *dite* Esther boarded another ship that took her away from the island. The upheaval caused by the Haitian Revolution forced tens of thousands of inhabitants to flee the colony and resettle in neighboring Caribbean islands, North American port cities, and France. While the exact details of her flight from Saint-Domingue remain unclear, Sirnir was among the numerous refugees that disembarked in New Orleans between 1791 and 1810. She likely traveled there from Le Cap with Jean Maurau and his wife, Marie Antoinette Eugenie Montmartin in 1804.[1] In fact, free women of color like Sirnir and Montmartin made up a significant proportion of the refugees that relocated during the Revolution. This was particularly the case in New Orleans, where thousands of free women of African descent came either directly or after first resettling in Cuba and other points.[2]

Not much is known about Sirnir's decision to leave Saint-Domingue, but her first testament, recorded in New Orleans on October 26, 1812, provides some insight into her

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[1] [Slave Sale between Jean Maurau and Pedro de Torres], November 15, 1804; [Testament of Marie Antoinette Eugenie Monmartin, wife of Jean Maurau], June 27, 1811 in Marc Lafitte, Volume 12, page 328, NARC;*Testament par Jean Maureau,* January 4, 1819; *Testament par Jean Maureau,* August 12, 1819. It is also possible that the Mauraus and Sirnir traveled first to Jamaica and then relocated to New Orleans. In 1803-1804, at least 1,000 refugees arrived in ships from the British colony. For an overview of refugee arrivals to New Orleans between 1803 and 1809 see Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New* Orleans, 24-25.

[2] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 27; Lachance, "Repercussions," 213; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration,"247-248

experience during the war. By 1812 Marie Justine Sirnir had lived in the Crescent City for almost a decade and was well-established in her new residence, owning two lots with houses and five slaves. When she became extremely ill in October, Sirnir recorded a will to distribute her property in the event of her death.[3] Unlike many émigrés who described themselves in notary records as "inhabitants of Saint-Domingue" and "refugees in this place," Sirnir never directly mentioned her former residence in her 1812 testament. Information included in the document, however, clearly references her time on the island and the tragic consequences of the war for her family. Through her choice of beneficiaries and testamentary executor, Sirnir's testament describes the personal loss she experienced as a result of relocation during the Haitian Revolution as well as the important social connections she maintained with Maurau family members in her new home.

The relatives of François Maurau figure prominently in Sirnir's 1812 will. She left one of her houses to his granddaughter, Julienne, the young daughter of Marie Emelie Maurau and Antoine Besset. Julienne was born in Santiago de Cuba in 1806. Marie Emelie, along with her family, joined her uncle, Jean Maurau, in New Orleans in 1809.[4] Sirnir designated Jean Maurau as her testamentary executor, trusting him to attend to her estate after her death. She also named Maurau as her universal legatee, which meant he

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[3] *Testament,* 1812.

[4] *Testament,* 1812; *Contrat de mariage entre le Sr. Antoine Besset et Dame Marie Moreau Veuve Monnin,* February 7, 1823. Julienne was born in Santiago de Cuba in 1806. Besset and Maurau's 1823 marriage contract legitimated their daughter's birth. She died in New Orleans on December 23, 1825 when she was about twenty years old. Her interment record gives her name as "Marie Jullienne Besset." Sirnir's 1812 will refers to Julienne as "Demoiselle Leonice," which refers to Besset's *dit* name, "Lyonais." Besset's 1826 funeral record gives both surnames and describes Besset as a native of Lyon. See Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans,* vol. 16, 1824-1825 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2001), 36; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans,* vol. 17, 1826-1827 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2002), 35.

would receive any property or assets that remained after her debts and legacies were paid.[5]

Sirnir, however, placed this bequest "under the condition that as soon as the heirs of Mr. François Moreau make themselves known, [Jean Maurau] will buy my son Celestin and give him his freedom in accordance with the laws in use in the country where my son is found[;] it has been twenty years since I have heard from him."[6] This heartbreaking plea hints at a painful separation between Sirnir and her son during the Revolution. She would have lost contact with Celestin around 1792 when he was about ten years. Although she did not know his location, she had reason to believe that even after twenty years Celestin—now a thirty year old man—remained in the possession of his master's family.[7]

With the condition that Jean Maurau must find and free her son Sirnir made a difficult request of her executor and universal legatee. This could be read as a sign of great faith in Maurau or as an act of desperation to locate Celestin. To some degree, it was probably both. To name Jean Maurau as executor and beneficiary, Marie Justine Sirnir relied on ties that stretched back to Saint-Domingue and most likely came about because of her enslavement. Sirnir's connection with this white family may have represented her old life on the island, but the Mauraus also provided her with the best chance to be reunited with Celestin. In fact, the hope of finding her son by maintaining contact with Jean Maurau may have led to Sirnir's decision to relocate to New Orleans in 1804.

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[5] *Testament*, 1812.
[6] *Testament*, 1812.
[7] *Testament*, 1812.

Marie Justine Sirnir's 1812 testament leaves unanswered many questions concerning her migration from Saint-Domingue to New Orleans. In order to better understand this time in her life, I turn to notary acts created by other free women of color that illuminate the broader contours of the Saint-Domingue refugee experience. This chapter uses documents recorded in Cuba, Charleston, and New Orleans to reconstruct the movement of free women of color between 1791 and 1810. Able to hold property but with tenuous social power, free women of color used legal documents to secure and record their lives. Such documents detail individuals' travel, property, and social relationships, and, in turn, reveal the effects of revolution and relocation on the lives of free black women. Accounting for the ways these refugees experienced gender, race, and dislocation, this chapter recovers, in the networks of women of color from Saint-Domingue, an important set of actors in an Atlantic World reshaped by revolution.

Migration Patterns

Over the course of the Haitian Revolution, tens of thousands white, free colored, and enslaved inhabitants left the island for safer shores. Exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint because refugees often moved between locales and back and forth to Saint-Domingue before settling permanently.[8] Although concentrated in certain locales, particularly New Orleans, cities up and down the Eastern seaboard, Cuba, Jamaica, and

[8] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 15; R. Darrell Meadows, "Engineering Exile: Social Networks and the French Atlantic Community, 1789-1809," *French Historical Studies*, 23 (2000): 70. Dessens explains that total numbers are difficult to determine but suggests that it was "several tens of thousands." Dessens, 19.

Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic) all felt the impact of the dispersal of Saint-Domingue refugees.[9]

Noticeable waves of migration occurred at particular points during the Revolution. The initial emigration took place in the first two years, following the massive revolt of slaves in the northern plain and culminating in 1793 when 10,000 people desperately escaped the burning city of Cap Français in ships headed to ports along the Eastern United States.[10] The second wave took place in 1798 when Toussaint Louverture defeated the British army that had occupied parts of the South, West, and the strategic northwestern port of Môle Saint-Nicolas since 1793. About 2,000 residents followed the English to Jamaica at this point.[11] The final exodus of inhabitants from the island occurred in 1803, this time coinciding with the evacuation of what was left of Napoleon's expeditionary forces sent to take back possession of the colony from Louverture in 1802. Following the defeat of the French by the black "indigenous army" under the command of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, thousands of Saint-Dominguans migrated to Cuba and the United States, including southern port cities like Charleston and Savannah.[12]

Louisiana became the final home for a large number of Saint-Domingue refugees, but for most it was a secondary destination. Some inhabitants did arrive directly from the island, following the evacuation of the French army in 1803. Others relocated from their original places of settlement, including New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Still more came from Jamaica, including 1,000 people in 1803-1804. The largest influx of

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[9] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 15, 68; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution*, 2.

[10] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 15; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 2, 289-293. Refugees landed in Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston. See Popkin, 295.

[11] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 13, 15; Lachance, "Repercussions," 212; Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba," 38. Besides Jamaica, some refugees went to Cuba and the United States at this point, as well.

[12] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, quote on 293; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 13-15; Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba," 41; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 167, 170.

refugees to New Orleans arrived between May 1809 and January 1810 from Cuba, following the outbreak of war between Spain and France. The initial group contained 9,059 people, according to a municipal government report. The total number of Saint-Dominguans in this final wave eventually exceeded 10,000 when additional refugees reached New Orleans in early 1810.[13]

Whether identified as "free" or "slave," the vast majority of refugees of African descent that arrived from Cuba were women and children. Of the adults regarded as "free colored and black people," 1,377 women greatly outnumbered 428 men.[14] These figures may well reflect the overall pattern of migration among free black refugees, as more men lost their lives in the war and women and children more easily gained permission to leave the island.[15] Fearing their potential to incite rebellion, the Louisiana legislature further circumscribed the movements of Saint-Domingue free men of color by banning their entrance into the territory in 1806. According to the logic of the law, only men were responsible for the Haitian Revolution; women and children "shall be supposed to have left the island above named, to fly from the horrors committed during its insurrection."[16] Admittedly, the ban was difficult to enforce, and free men of color did resettle in New Orleans.[17] Nevertheless, initial numbers of Saint-Dominguans from Cuba clearly indicate

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[13] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 15, 21-27; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 246-248; Lachance, "Repercussions," 212-213; Gabriel Debien and René Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana, 1792-1804" trans. David Cheramie in *The Road to Louisiana*, 113-243, especially 221.

[14] Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne*, vol. 4 (Jackson, MS: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 381-382, 409; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 247 and Lachance, "Repercussions," 213. Children numbered 1,297 in the "free people of color" group and 934 in the "slave" group. Among adults categorized as "slaves," there were 962 men compared to 1,330 women.

[15] Popkin, *Concise History*, 131; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 291; Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba," 45.

[16] Quoted in Rebecca Scott, "She...Refuses," 120.

[17] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 43; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 185; Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:407. Exact numbers are unknown, but sacramental and notary records in New Orleans indicate that free men of color from Saint-Domingue did settle in New Orleans. Some men entered

that the migration experience of free black refugees in New Orleans was conditioned, in no small part, by gender.

Arriving over the period of a few months, male and female refugees from Cuba made an immediate demographic impact on New Orleans. The surge of émigrés more than doubled the total population of the city, while the number of free people of color increased from 1,566 in 1805 to 4,950 in 1810—almost 29 percent of the total population.[18] The augmentation of the free black population may have been greater than these figures indicate. The official count recorded for the Mayor's Office divided the group of arrivals from Cuba almost evenly in thirds among whites (2,731), free people of color (3,102), and slaves (3,226). Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, however, challenge the presumption that those 3,226 refugees were "slaves," since slavery had been abolished in Saint-Domingue in 1794 and prohibited in the Haitian constitution.[19] Based on the claims of ownership by fellow refugees, Louisiana territorial officials disregarded the 1794 general emancipation decree and instead assigned slave status to thousands of incoming refugees of African descent. Once labeled as a slave it was difficult to reverse

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New Orleans through Barataria, "a coastal settlement just west of the Mississippi River." Caryn Cossé Bell, "Haitian Immigration to Louisiana in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (New York: The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2005), accessed February 19, 2012, http://www.inmotionaame.org/texts /viewer.cfm?id=5_000T&page=1. Free black refugee men fought in the Battle of New Orleans against the British in 1815. One battalion was comprised of 250 Saint-Dominguans. Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest*, 55-56.

[18] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 1, 35; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 248; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 205-206.

[19] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 27; Lachance, "Repercussions," 213; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 247-248; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 66-69; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1062-1064; Scott, "She... Refuses," 119, 133-135; Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 227. Scott and Hébrard suggest that rather than taking these status labels at face value we should more precisely "describe the arriving immigrants instead as 2,731 people who in the context of New Orleans in 1809 could convincingly portray themselves as whites; 3,102 people who were deemed by observers to be 'of color' but who managed to persuade those around them that they were free; and 3,226 individuals who were deemed by observers to be of African ancestry and in whom one or another arriving passenger—or someone else—could make a persuasive claim to a property interest, hence 'slaves.' "

this classification. A few people purported to be held in bondage by others did successfully sue for their freedom, but many more spent the remainder of their lives in New Orleans as property.[20]

Sources on Paper, Resources in People

Despite their presence in New Orleans and other destinations, the migration experiences of free black refugees remain less documented than those of white Saint-Dominguans. Unlike many white refugees, free women of color rarely left behind letters, diaries, or eyewitness testimonies.[21] They did, however, record notary documents in refugee locales, including declarations, procuration acts, marriage contracts, and wills. These documents are an important source for recovering the process of migration for Saint-Domingue free women of color. Often made soon after arrival, such records suggest the types of legal actions, business arrangements, and personal information that refugees deemed important to chronicle in the moment of flight. They also provide details about the Revolution, pointing towards the circumstances under which women fled and the routes they may have traveled. Notary records commonly concerned property, as free women of color utilized these documents to protect their interests in houses, plantations, slaves and material goods. These women actively sought to manage and retain their property, particularly their former slaves, and relied on the assistance of other refugees to

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[20] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 66-71; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1063, 1075-1076, 1080-1085; Scott, "She... Refuses," 121, 126-132; Aslakson, "Making Race," 57-58, 64-81.

[21] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 20, 47. Dessens mentions "the few memoirs written by people of African descent" but only cites *The Memoir of Pierre Toussaint*, which was actually composed by white author Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee after Toussaint's death. Dessens, 47, 193n1. Anne Ulentin found a few letters written by free women of color refugees. See Ulentin, "Shades of Grey,"59, 66-67, 127-130. For examples of eyewitness accounts see Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*. For his study of white refugees, R. Darrell Meadows uses "memoirs and correspondence." Meadows, "Engineering Exile," 74.

do so. Thus, as socially created documents, notary records reveal the human networks that free women of color forged and maintained in the course of their migration.

Scott and Hébrard demonstrate the importance of written documentation for refugees whose lives were in flux. In fleeing Saint-Domingue, free women of color left a place without slaves and moved through various jurisdictions—Spanish, British, and the United States— where slavery not only still existed but where slave status and African descent were explicitly linked.[22] Thus, certain types of documents, such as freedom declarations and emancipation acts, express specific situations with which only refugees of African descent had to contend. Some women turned to notaries and other official record-keepers to document and defend their freedom. The declarations they recorded and the papers they registered to prove their free status highlight the risks of relocation for free black refugees. Despite gaining their freedom through the 1794 general emancipation decree, some women found themselves claimed as property by their former masters upon arrival in a slave society like Santiago de Cuba or New Orleans. Once settled, however, a few of these owners emancipated their slaves, providing freedom to people who legally had been free for as many as ten years. Seemingly superfluous, such manumission records illuminate the complex relationships between former slaves and former masters in a moment of great uncertainty over authority, status, and a future away from the island.

The documents that free women of color crafted to secure their property and establish new lives reflect the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas that

[22] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 3, 44-46, 48-50, 54-55, 57, 63-64.

characterizes Atlantic World history.[23] The tumult unleashed by the Haitian Revolution reverberated through the Atlantic as both people and property (most of it humans claimed as "property") were dispersed from France's most lucrative colony to other parts of the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe.[24] When former inhabitants of Saint-Domingue relocated they remained in contact with one another. R. Darrell Meadows argues that kinship ties and other social relationships among exiles of the French Revolution and white Saint-Domingue refugees aided both groups in their migration to North American port cities during the 1790s. Such networks, many forged long before the Revolutionary period, helped exiles and refugees flee to safety, often determining where they relocated. Once they arrived, a combination of personal relationships and "weak social ties" provided exiles with the necessary "raw materials of social support," including money, employment, and housing. Meadows finds that these connections crossed both geographical and social boundaries, including class, race, and politics.[25]

Similar networks existed among free women of color, connecting them to family, friends, and acquaintances in various refugee centers. Some relationships pre-existed migration and were continued or reconstituted in the new location. Others were created among refugees after they moved. Whether recent or long-standing, these connections were often anchored by property ownership, as free women of color exchanged land, attempted to reclaim lost slaves, or bequeathed an armoire in their wills. Saint-Domingue

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[23] Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 95.

[24] White, *Encountering Revolution,* 26.

[25] Meadows, "Engineering Exile," 72-73, 78-79, 82, 87, 102, quotes on 87 and 78, respectively. Meadows defines "weak" ties as "distant kin, acquaintances, 'vaguely known compatriots.' " See page 72 and footnote 14.

refugee networks linked people, places, and property together in a broader Atlantic World.

The free women of color who fled the island during the Revolution were a diverse group, and much like the networks of white Saint-Dominguans, the relationships established and preserved by free women of African descent spanned class, color, and status, and stretched throughout the Atlantic. Some women were formerly enslaved (*affranchis*) while others were free by birth. They were Africans and Creoles, "*negresses*" of pure African descent and "*mulatresses*" of various degrees of racial mixture. Differences in wealth, family status, education, and age, as well as where they lived in the colony structured their experiences. Many owned property, including land, slaves, houses, and businesses, in addition to material goods. Others spent much of their lives as property. Some women, like Marie Justine Sirnir, did both. Despite their varied backgrounds, free women of color refugees shared similar experiences of movement and dislocation that shaped their lives during the Revolution. When they came into contact with one another in Santiago de Cuba's "French Quarter," on the streets of Charleston, or at the baptismal font in New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral, they utilized their common experiences to create and maintain new bonds.

"A World in Motion"[26]

Uncovering the trajectories of free women of color refugees during the Haitian Revolution is difficult, as few documents clearly outline when and where they traveled. A timeline and course of movement for some individuals can be reconstructed, however,

[26] Bernard Bailyn described the history of the Atlantic as "a story of a world in motion." See Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 61.

through details included in notary records. This information correlates with broader refugee migration patterns and points towards specific aspects that may have conditioned the experience for free women of color. Knowing when and where these women lived out the Revolution generates a better understanding what their daily lives were like during the war, as well as their motivations for ultimately leaving the island.

For some women, displacement from their homes began in the early years of the Revolution. Rosalie Chesneau, a free *mulatresse*, left the house she owned in the small town of Jean Rabel and her indigo plantations in nearby Guinaudée for the relative safety of Môle Saint-Nicolas by 1795.[27] The British had occupied the Môle since September 1793, and almost immediately inhabitants from the surrounding area flocked there "expecting assistance or employment."[28] It is unclear how long Chesneau remained at Môle Saint-Nicolas, but she eventually relocated to Baracoa, Cuba where she stayed until 1809. By January 25, 1810, Rosalie Chesneau was in New Orleans. She lived in the Crescent City until her death in 1833.[29]

Piecing together Chesneau's movement required multiple documents, but records for other women provide more direct clues. A "*negresse libre*" named Marguerite Guitonne Reine recorded a marriage contract with her "future spouse," a French native

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[27] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau, fcl*, January 25, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 21, page 226, NARC; *Rosalie Chaineau Sa procuration*, September 12, 1821, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 19, page 288, NARC; *État Général des Habitations de la Paroisse de Jean Rabel*, Florèal, An 3, 5SUPSDOM, 1: *État Général et Particulier du Nord*, ANOM.

[28] David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), quote on 108, 115, 232, 337.

[29] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau,* January 25, 1810; *Inventaire des biens dependant de la Succession de feu Rosalie Chesneau*, September 9, 1833, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 32, Act 957; *Rosalie Chaineau Enregt de pièce*, May 26, 1821, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 19, page 195; *Vente d'esclave par Rosalie Chesneau à Marie Zilia neg.sse lib.*, April 10, 1832, acts of T. Seghers, Volume 5, Act 161, NARC.

named Jean Baptiste Augebert Delaunay on April 30, 1806 in Baracoa.[30] The contract described the assets each party brought to the marriage and legitimated the seven children the couple had together over the course of fourteen years. Based on the listed date and location of each child's birth, a detailed picture of the family's travels over the course of the Revolution can be reconstructed.

In addition to the burden of extensive movement and its attendant upheaval, Marguerite Guitonne Reine spent almost the entire Revolution pregnant. Following the birth of their first son, Jean Baptiste Dieu-Donné, in Petit St. Louis in 1792, the couple had a child almost every two years. They were still in Petit St. Louis, a parish in the northwestern district of Port-de-Paix in 1794 when Charles Antoine Filicourt was born. By 1797, however, they had moved further west to the neighboring parish of Jean Rabel, where they had two daughters and lived until 1800 or so. By the birth of their fifth child, Elizabeth Jeanne Nirzine, in 1801, the family was in Môle Saint-Nicolas. In the wake of the withdrawal of French troops from the island, the couple relocated to Baracoa where they had another daughter on November 12, 1803. Three years later, after the birth of their seventh child, the peripatetic couple recorded their marriage contract before the agent of the French government in the Spanish port town.[31] The family's sojourn in Baracoa ended in 1809. Forced out of the colony, they continued on to Louisiana. Reine

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[30] *Contrat de Mariage entre le Sieur Jean-Baptiste Augebert Delaunay & la nommée Margueritte Guitonne Reine, négresse libre* in Consulats Américains (1794-1826), 6SUPSDOM-4, ANOM.

[31] *Contrat de Mariage*. Spanish colonial officials did not allow a French consulate in Cuba, but the Captain General of Guadeloupe authorized his clerks working in the privateering regulation agency he set up in Cuba to record copies or accept deposits of papers by Saint-Dominguans. Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 55.

gave birth to another daughter shortly before their departure. The little girl was baptized in New Orleans on September 9, 1811.[32]

Reine and Delaunay's decision to travel to Baracoa was likely based on expediency in the hectic moment of flight, although they may have known fellow émigrés already living there. Cuba served as a place of refuge for Saint-Dominguans throughout the Revolutionary period. In the early years of the war, individuals moved back and forth between Cuba and their homes, using the neighboring Spanish colony as a safe place to wait out the conflict. Following Louverture's defeat of the British and their withdrawal from the island, a large number of French residents, mostly from the West, fled to Cuba in late 1798 and early 1799. Another sizeable group, this time free people of color from the South, departed in 1800 after Louverture conquered André Rigaud's army. Most of these evacuees were Rigaud's soldiers and many of them returned to Saint-Domingue with General Leclerc's arrival in 1802. The final phase began in the summer of 1803, as the defeated French troops began to leave the island. This "great exodus," particularly from the South and West, landed thousands of refugees in Santiago de Cuba, Baracoa, and Havana.[33]

Most of the free women of color who recorded documents in Baracoa and Santiago de Cuba arrived as part of this final group of emígrés. Several women explain that their arrival directly followed the departure of the French army. In a declaration recorded on October 27, 1804 in Santiago de Cuba, Marguerite Caillou claimed "that she

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[32] Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 10, 1810-1812 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1995), 110. The eighth child, Adelaide Josephine, was born in Baracoa on June 3, 1809.

[33] Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba," 33-34, 40-41, 44-45. In 1808 there were 7,449 refugees in Santiago de Cuba. Matt Childs, " 'A Black French General Arrived to Conquer the Island': Images of the Haitian Revolution in Cuba's 1812 Aponte Rebellion" in Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, 139.

was in St. Marc at the time the French army arrived in Saint Domingue and she had evacuated this city with the army[;] she took refuge [in Santiago de Cuba] during the evacuation where she has constantly remained."[34] Other women referenced the "evacuation of the French" as an explanation for how they came to be in Cuba, but where they landed on the island depended on their point of departure from Saint-Domingue.[35] In the records used for this chapter, every woman from the West (St. Marc, Verrettes) and all except one from the South (Jérémie) relocated to Santiago de Cuba. Meanwhile, the women from areas in the North (Cap Français, Jean Rabel, Môle Saint-Nicolas) went to Baracoa. The location of these Cuban port cities—Baracoa on the northern side and Santiago de Cuba on the southern side—align with the correlating departure points in Saint-Domingue. (Fig. 2)

Location in the colony in the final months of the Revolution, then, likely determined where free women of color resettled after leaving the island. This geographic factor had consequences for the ways in which refugee communities, particularly those in Cuba and later New Orleans developed. Common departure and arrival points increased the chances that these women would be reunited with relatives, friends, and acquaintances, easing their transition to an unfamiliar place. As free women of color adjusted to their new surroundings, reliance on such relationships was often necessary, particularly when it came to proving one's freedom or verifying one's ownership of a slave.

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[34] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou*, 5 Brumaire An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-1, ANOM.

[35] For other references to the French army's evacuation see *Enrégistrement de la liberté de Fanchette*, September 24, 1806 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3; *Déclaration de la Citoyenne Zaire*, September 26, 1806 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3, ANOM.

"The Effect of the Events of the War"

The bloody conflicts of the Haitian Revolution and subsequent flight to foreign places were traumatic for all refugees—regardless of race.[36] In declarations and other notarial acts recorded in Santiago de Cuba, French officials explained the refugees' current situation as a consequence of "the effect of the events of the war."[37] Despite their formal legal structure, notary records often included descriptions of wartime events. Indeed, their creation commonly reflected the specific circumstances of the Revolution, detailing dislocation, misfortune, and loss.

For the most part, the types of acts recorded by whites and free people of color functioned in the same way and shared common themes. For example, statements made by both groups frequently referenced the loss of personal papers such as land titles, promissory notes, and baptism records. These kinds of documents enabled Saint-Domingue refugees to support claims they made about their previous lives, such as where they were born or the plantation they owned. The loss of such documentation hindered these claims and often required testimonies from witnesses to attest to their truth.

Yet, for free women of color the loss of personal papers could have dire consequences when relocating to a place where slavery remained intact. Without proof of their freedom, these women risked imprisonment and enslavement.[38] To counteract this

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[36] Meadows, "Engineering Exile," 93; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 46-47, 54, 62-63.

[37] For examples of documents with this phrase, see *Déclaration sur les droits de propriété de la nommée Cécile Charlesteguy sur le nègre Jean Baptiste dit La Guerre*, 15 Nivôse An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-1; *Déclaration de Marie Louise Didier Vve. Renaud*, 14 Frimaire An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3; *Enrégistrement du testament de Marie Louise Dubourg*, 25 Brumaire An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3, ANOM.

[38] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 43, 46-50. Even with proof of their liberty, free refugees of color were often imprisoned after disembarking. For example, a free woman of color named Henriette Dessources recorded a declaration in Charleston on March 23, 1810 to report her missing trunk. Dessources explained that three days after the ship docked in Charleston, all of the free refugees of color on board,

possibility, free women of African descent made acts that declared and substantiated their freedom. Such documents indicate the ways race shaped these women's experience of dislocation, placing burdens on them that white refugees did not face. In the process, the documents provide a glimpse of the "events of the war" that forced these women to leave their homes.

In addition to enduring the Revolution either pregnant or nursing, Marguerite Guitonne Reine likely spent much of this time unsure of her status. Reine was born a slave in Fort Dauphin, but her marriage contract made in Baracoa clearly stated that she was "free in her actions, mistress of her person, and [had] all the rights accorded to the *affranchis*." To prove this, she submitted a manumission act made by her former mistress on September 5, 1803, which had been recorded by a notary in Cap Français and "legalized" by a judge.[39] Technically, Reine's status as a free woman did not require a notarized manumission act. The French Republican government's general emancipation decree ended slavery in the colony almost a decade before. Whether or not this decree would be upheld outside of Saint-Domingue, however, remained to be seen. The timing of Reine's manumission record with the subsequent evacuations of Le Cap and the Môle suggests that she sought official recognition of her freedom before the family departed to a foreign country.[40] Distrusting the vagaries of relocation, Marguerite took care to leave Saint-Domingue as a *documented* free woman.

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including herself and her family, were taken to jail for "security measures" based on a law "that forbids the introduction of persons of color" in South Carolina. Dessources spent three months in jail, which kept her from reporting her missing property sooner. See *Déclaration de Hen.tte Dessources*, March 23, 1810 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-10, ANOM.

[39] *Contrat de Mariage.*

[40] Debien, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Cuba," 41-42. Other women procured documentation of their free status before leaving Saint-Domingue, although not all individuals were able to access a notary. See, for example, Scott and Hébrard's discussion of the "improvised document" written by Michel Vincent for his partner, Rosalie in *Freedom Papers,* 44-47.

Other free women of color who resettled in Cuba re-recorded their emancipation acts with the French government agent there. An "Arada" woman named Fanchette registered hers in Santiago de Cuba on September 24, 1806.[41] Fanchette had been a slave on a plantation in Petite Rivière in the Artibonite Valley. Her master, Mr. Borin, originally emancipated her in 1781 but registered her manumission again in Port-au-Prince on July 20, 1803. He explained that this was necessary because Fanchette had lost her freedom papers "in the troubles that occurred...when the French arrived."[42] A month later, Fanchette deposited a copy of Borin's document with a notary in St. Marc. She likely left for Santiago de Cuba shortly after, following the evacuation of the French army in September.[43] After three years in Cuba, Fanchette once again registered her freedom papers. The Santiago de Cuba version both pointed to the loss of the original record and reiterated the paper trail that Fanchette established with the help of her former master before leaving Saint-Domingue. Creating an additional record of her free status in her new residence likely provided Fanchette with a sense of security.

A Congolese woman named Zaire also lost her manumission record in the final years of the war. Zaire gained her freedom from the Widow Courtin in St. Marc in 1788. The original document, filed with the city's public records, was destroyed in 1802 when Dessalines burned St. Marc to keep it out of French hands.[44] Zaire traveled to Cuba with Servais, the brother of her former mistress. To counter a challenge by another sibling for property rights over Zaire, Servais registered her freedom again in Santiago de Cuba on

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[41] *Enregistrement de la liberté de Fanchette*, September 24, 1806 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3, ANOM.

[42] *Enregistrement de la liberté de Fanchette*, September 24, 1806.

[43] Jacques Nicolas Léger, *Haiti: Her History and Her Detractors* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1907), 145.

[44] *Déclaration de la Citoyenne Zaire*, September 26, 1806 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3, ANOM; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 269-270.

September 4, 1803. Three years later, Zaire came before the French government official to register the 1803 document. Like Fanchette, she registered a previously recorded document made as a substitution for her original manumission record. Perhaps by 1806 Servais no longer lived in Cuba, prompting Zaire to make a record of her status in her own name.

That Fanchette and Zaire were African-born increased their risk of re-enslavement or possible removal from Cuba. With the influx of refugees, Spanish colonial authorities fretted over "what to do with persons of color from French ports who looked to officials as though they ought to be slaves, but were behaving as if they were free." One proposed solution, although never implemented, was deportation.[45] Fanchette and Zaire responded to Spanish officials' perceived notions of who was a slave and who was free by (re)registering their manumission papers. Both women's claims to freedom were likely bolstered by the fact that they had gained their liberty long before the general emancipation of 1794 and had the support of a former master to substantiate this in the initial absence of proof.

Formerly enslaved women were not the only ones to insist on officially registering their free status. Marguerite Caillou, "*mulatresse née libre*," recorded a declaration of freedom in Santiago de Cuba on October 27, 1804. Caillou explained that as the daughter of a "free black woman" and a "white planter" she was indeed free by birth.[46] Her baptism record served as the proof of her status, but she lost her copy during the war. In order to verify her claims, three male witnesses from her home district swore that they had full knowledge of Caillou's freedom, the loss of her baptism record, and her

[45] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 57, 58.
[46] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou,* 5 Brumaire An 13.

relocation to Cuba.[47] Lacking documentation, Caillou looked to her fellow refugees to confirm her status as a free woman.

The motivation behind the decision to stay in Saint-Domingue or risk the uncertainty of migration is rarely apparent in these documents. However, Marguerite Caillou's declaration hints at a traumatic experience that may have convinced her to leave. Originally from Verrettes, a small parish outside of St. Marc in the Artibonite Valley, Caillou had relocated to the port city and was there when Napoleon's expeditionary forces arrived. Caillou explained that she lost her baptism record when she was forced "in the woods by the revolting blacks and mulattoes."[48] This surely refers to Dessalines' decision to burn St. Marc in 1802. According to historian Laurent Dubois, when the French appeared "they found the town smoldering and abandoned, with the dead bodies of several hundred residents, mostly whites, left to greet them."[49] Caillou's declaration confirms this when she states that the public copy of her baptism record, archived in St. Marc, was "prey to the flames at the time of the burning of the city, such that it is not possible to procure a new" one.[50] Dessalines and his men left St. Marc with numerous white prisoners, but executed them as they moved away from the coast. When the French commander following Dessalines' troops arrived in Verrettes he found 800 bodies.[51] Caillou's own life was spared by escaping to the woods, but the massacre may have convinced her to leave the island. Once in Cuba, she took action to secure her free status in her new home.

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[47] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou,* 5 Brumaire An 13.
[48] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou,* 5 Brumaire An 13.
[49] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 270.
[50] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou,* 5 Brumaire An 13.
[51] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World,* 270-271.

By recording these documents, Fanchette, Zaire, and Marguerite Caillou took precautions against the very real threat of losing their freedom. Free people of African descent risked seizure and enslavement in fleeing Saint-Domingue from privateers, soldiers, and unscrupulous fellow refugees. Romain *dit* Louis Hervé, the young nephew of Marie Françoise Lambert, who was also from Verrettes, suffered just such a fate. Romain was about twelve years old when he fled to Santiago de Cuba with relatives in 1803. While there, he was persuaded by a man named Albert to travel to Charleston where Albert promised to "procure him a trade." Instead, Albert sold Romain "as a slave" to Gilbert, who brought him to New Orleans. Prix Doucet purchased Romain from Gilbert but sold him to Jean Rodriguez by 1809. Romain disclosed his free status to each "master" but to no avail.[52] Separated from his family and without written documentation, he had little recourse to challenge his enslavement. Once in New Orleans, however, Romain may have seen someone he knew from Saint-Domingue and sent word to his aunt in Cuba.

However she learned of Romain's whereabouts, Marie Françoise Lambert went to great lengths to rescue her nephew from enslavement. First she created written proof of Romain's status. In November 1808 she secured the testimonies of four men from her parish to verify that Romain was "truly free from birth." Lambert also submitted a copy of Romain's baptism record, which reiterated his freedom and indicated that she and her late husband were his godparents.[53] Next, Lambert gave power of attorney to Antoine

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[52] *Hervey dit Romain (fmoc), Louis v. Rodriguez, John*, case no. 1893, October 16, 1809, New Orleans City Court, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA, hereafter, *Hervey v. Rodriguez*.

[53] *Enquête pour constater l'etat civil du nommé Romain,* November 23, 1808. The document did not describe any of the four witnesses by race, but all four men were referred to as "Sieur." This courtesy title quite often but not always denoted a white person. Through cross-referencing, however, I have determined that at least one of the witnesses was a free man of color.

Rocheville de Menard, a white refugee who had relocated to Louisiana by 1806, to assist her in New Orleans.[54] Lambert instructed that Romain be returned to her in Cuba and that legal action be taken against Doucet, if he refused to comply.[55] Utilizing the resources available to her in Cuba, Lambert activated refugee networks between Santiago and New Orleans, enlisted associates with personal knowledge of her family, and generated significant documentation to regain Romain's freedom.

It is unclear if Rocheville de Menard followed through with Lambert's requests. Despite his aunt's efforts in Cuba, Romain remained enslaved when Lambert arrived in New Orleans in 1809. She continued to fight for her nephew's release, prompting Rodriguez to punish Romain when he learned that the young man "was able to establish his freedom."[56] Lambert pursued further legal action. She sponsored "the petition of Lewis Hervey *dit* Romain" submitted to New Orleans City Court on October 9. Claiming that Rodriguez illegally held Romain as a slave, the petition requested that his "liberty be

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[54] Antoine Rocheville de Menard was a native of Port-au-Prince. In New Orleans, he had several children with a free woman of color named Marie Louise Bremard, a native of St. Marc. See Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 8, 1804-1806 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1993), 231; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 9, 1807-1809 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1994), 252, 315; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 11, 1813-1815 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1996), 377; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 13, 1818-1819 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1998), 295.

[55] *Procuration par Marie Françoise Lambert Veuve Bastard*, November 24, 1808; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 11:377.

[56] Romain claimed that Rodriguez's punishment consisted of "put[ting] him to the public work." Enslaved individuals who were incarcerated in New Orleans for various punishable offenses, such as running away, were made to work for the city. "Public work" performed by slaves involved tasks like cleaning the gutters of sewage and trash or building up the levees. This was likely an attempt on Rodriguez's part to elude Lambert and keep Romain and his aunt from pursuing legal action. For information on the public work see Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 99; Dale Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 42.

restored" and that he receive financial compensation "for unjust detention of his person."[57] Lambert verified the truth of Romain's statement.

On October 18, Rodriguez filed a response to the petition in which he denied any wrongdoing. He requested that the suit be dismissed and that Lambert, as "the instigator of this process," be made to pay costs and damages "for depriving him of his slave."[58] Judge Louis Moreau-Lislet did not agree. On April 10, 1810, he ruled in Romain's favor, ordering that Romain "be restored to his former freedom" and that Rodriguez be required to pay all costs.[59] Through her determined actions, Marie Françoise Lambert successfully gained Romain's release from bondage. Her efforts reveal the multiple strategies free women of color refugees employed to keep their families together and safe in the chaotic aftermath of the Revolution.

"to make her happy and free"

If the "effects of the events of the war" threatened the status of free refugee women of color and their family members, relocation during the Revolution could lead to emancipation for enslaved women and children who accompanied their owners in flight. White and free black slave owners who left the colony before 1794 often brought bondsmen and –women with them. The large group of émigrés from Le Cap in 1793, for

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[57] *Hervey v. Rodriguez.*

[58] *Hervey v. Rodriguez.* In his response, Rodriguez said that he purchased Romain "in good faith" from Prix Doucet on November 21, 1806 for $550. He further claimed that the sale was publicly recorded by New Orleans notary Pedesclaux. Although I could locate records that involved both Prix Doucet and Jean Rodriguez, separate, I could not find any record of this specific transaction in Pedesclaux's records in the New Orleans Notarial Archives. It is also not listed in any other notary's index housed in the archives and could not be located in Midlo Hall's database of Louisiana slave sales.

[59] *Hervey v. Rodriguez.* Louis Elisabeth Casimir Moreau-Lislet was a white native of Cap Français who worked as a lawyer and a judge in the colony before relocated to Cuba in 1803 and then New Orleans in 1806. Moreau-Lislet played a significant role in combining French and Spanish civil law with the United States common law traditions, following the Louisiana Purchase. For more on Moreau-Lislet and the freedom suits in New Orleans City Court see Aslakson, "Making Race," Chapter 2, especially 63-89 and Scott, "She...Refuses," especially 117-122.

example, included enslaved men, women, and children, who fled with their masters from the burning city. The circumstances under which enslaved refugees left Saint-Domingue is not always clear. Owners often cited "loyalty," but a combination of factors surely motivated people held in bondage to leave the island with their masters, including fear, uncertainty, coercion, and perhaps the promise of freedom.[60] After resettling in places in Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, some owners emancipated select slaves, mostly women and children.[61] For enslaved refugee women emancipated in their new homes, the migration experience involved not only geographic movement but also social movement—from slave to free.

Depending on where enslaved refugees and their masters landed, some slave owners were forced to indenture and eventually manumit their slaves due to gradual emancipation laws in effect in states like Pennsylvania and New York. These laws did not necessarily guarantee freedom for enslaved Saint-Dominguans. White refugees petitioned local legislatures to exempt them from gradual emancipation laws or moved to states where their property rights in humans would be respected. A number of enslaved refugees challenged attempts by their masters to continue to hold them in bondage. Some slaves ran away. Others utilized the court system, often with the help of local abolition societies in northern states, to sue for their freedom.[62]

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[60] White, *Encountering Revolution,* 140-141; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 268; Susan Branson and Leslie Patrick, "Étrangers dans un Pays Étrange: Saint-Dominguan Refugees of Color in Philadelphia," in Geggus, *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, 194; Sue Peabody, " 'Free Upon Higher Ground': Saint-Domingue Slaves' Suits for Freedom in U.S. Courts, 1792-1830" in Geggus and Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. David Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 263-264.

[61] Ashli White, " 'A flood of impure lava:' Saint-Domingue Refugees in the United States, 1791-1820" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003), 33-35; Branson and Patrick, "Étrangers dans un Pays Étrange," 196.

[62] Peabody, "Free Upon Higher Ground," 262, 26-267, 272-273; Branson and Patrick, "Étrangers dans un Pays Étrange," 194-196, 199-201; White, "Impure Lava," 34, 139-140, 242.

People of African descent who left Saint-Domingue after 1794 were technically not slaves, but this did not deter former masters or other refugees from claiming them as property again after landing in places where slavery existed.[63] Jean-Baptiste Maurin, a white refugee from Le Cap, moved to Baracoa with four women and two men whom he asserted were slaves. In a declaration recorded with French officials on October 31, 1807, Maurin formally acknowledged that the six "slaves" actually belonged to a free woman of color named Marie Louise Tonnelier. He explained that Tonnelier permitted the slaves to be in his service "because during the evacuation of Le Cap, he was abandoned by all of his blacks with the exception of one" while Tonnelier "had the advantage of being followed by all of hers."[64] Maurin stated that his slaves "abandoned" him, but really he had no legal claims to his bondspeople on the eve of Haitian Independence. Yet, many slave-owning Saint-Dominguans believed the French republican government's abolition of slavery to be illegitimate and sought to maintain control over their former slaves. Where Maurin failed to preserve his position of power over his bondsmen and -women, Tonnelier succeeded in retaining her authority to the extent that her former slaves "followed" her to Cuba. Spanish colonial authorities, wary of the effect freed Saint-Dominguans of African descent would have on enslaved men and women in Cuba, supported slave owners like Maurin and Tonnelier in reasserting their property rights in former slaves.[65]

Enslaved people comprised a valuable form of wealth with which most slave owners were loath to part. In contrast to land, which proprietors were forced to leave

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[63] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 49-52; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1068, 1070, 1072-1074.

[64] *Déclaration M. Maurin en faveur de Mre Lse Tonnelier*, October 31, 1807 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4, ANOM.

[65] Scott, "She...Refuses," 122, 124; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 50, 52, 57-58; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1067-1069.

behind, human "property" could be transported. It is unsurprising that former owners would strive to bring former bondspeople with them, given the economic benefits that free émigrés gained from owning slaves in refugee destinations. They were able to do so using force, persuasion, and/or close ties.[66] Beyond the financial advantages, other concerns likely motivated former owners like Maurin and Tonnelier to travel with slaves. According to Maurin, "in this state of abandonment" he was "unable to keep his house and be served" if Tonnelier had not loaned him six of her "slaves" for his own use in Cuba.[67] Maurin's statement suggests that beyond the practical value of access to free labor from the borrowed slaves, their presence provided him with a psychological comfort by permitting him to maintain the lifestyle to which he was accustomed in Le Cap.

It is perhaps more difficult to understand a formerly enslaved individual's reason for leaving the island. The complexity surrounding this decision, if indeed one had a choice, surely rested on the specific circumstances of the departure and what she felt was the best situation for her and her family. It is likely that in many cases former slaves left the colony with former masters believing that they traveled as free individuals and would continue to enjoy their free status in their new home. Unfortunately, these claims to freedom were tenuous at best, particularly when relocation to slave societies provided former masters, as well as their heirs, business partners, or even creditors a legal claim to slaves made free by the 1794 emancipation decree.[68]

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[66] Scott, "She...Refuses," 124; Peabody, "Free Upon Higher Ground," 263-264; White, "Impure Lava," 33-35.

[67] *Déclaration M. Maurin en faveur de Mre Lse Tonnelier*, October 31, 1807 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4, ANOM.

[68] Scott, "She...Refuses," 121. This was the case for Adélaide Métayer, a former slave from Saint-Domingue who went to court in New Orleans to defend her claims to freedom, after relocating first to Baracoa without her former master and living there as a free woman for seven years. For an analysis of

The status of some émigrés shifted from free to slave as they disembarked. When ships with refugees arrived in Cuba captains were supposed to present passenger lists to Spanish officials to gain authorization to land. Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard explain that refugees of African descent were given assorted labels on these lists including *criados* (servants) and *esclavos* (slaves). *Criados* (or *domestiques* in French) was a vague term that "could mean either servant or slave, and would serve to cover a multitude of relationships."[69] How captains determined these classifications varied. In some instances, individuals visibly coded as "black" and therefore suspected to have been enslaved by Cuban authorities, had to attach themselves to a refugee considered free in order to disembark. In other cases, former owners laid claim to people whom they considered their slaves by describing them as such to the captain.[70] Essentially written back into slavery, formerly enslaved refugees may not have fully understood the weight of such reclassification until "they suddenly found themselves offered for sale, or when they attempted to exercise one or another right denied to slaves—departure from the household, or autonomous employment on their own initiative."[71]

Thus, some formerly enslaved women found their freedom revoked when they relocated with their former masters to destinations where slavery existed. While these slave owners proved quick to reassert property rights in former slaves, a few of them utilized the notary system to emancipate individuals who "followed" them from Saint-Domingue. Four examples of emancipation acts recorded in Cuba illustrate the various and complex circumstances under which formerly enslaved women migrated from Saint-

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Métayer's case see Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 69-70; Scott, "She...Refuses," 115-136; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1074-1087.

[69] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 52-53, 60.

[70] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 50-51; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1067-1069.

[71] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 53.

Domingue. Whether the manumitted subjects of these records believed themselves to be free when embarking for Cuba or not, it is clear that the individuals granting the manumission considered themselves the rightful owners of slaves. In fact, none of the acts refer to the 1794 general emancipation decree even when they point to a previous act of emancipation or a long-held plan to free the "slave" in question. Together, these records reveal the complications caused by shifting jurisdictions and the real uncertainty surrounding the authority of the revolutionary actions of the French Republican and Haitian governments within the broader Atlantic World.

Although the twenty-seven year old creole named Froisine technically gained her freedom in 1794, she was sold in Santiago de Cuba as a slave in December 1803. Her experience suggests that she may have been forced to leave Saint-Domingue against her will. Froisine originally belonged to François Ballon and his wife, Elizabeth d'Herve. By 1803 François and Elizabeth were deceased, and Froisine had been inherited by the couple's two sons, Sieur Ballon des Ravines Noury and Sieur Ballon Dessources. The Ballon brothers evacuated the island and brought Froisine with them to Cuba, where they successfully claimed her as their property. Not long after their arrival in Santiago de Cuba, the coheirs sold Froisine to Pierre Maricet on December 28, 1803. A fellow refugee and ship captain, Maricet paid part of the purchase price upfront, owing the remaining sum. By April 4, 1804 Captain Maricet had fully paid for Froisine.[72] Rather than gaining freedom during the Revolution, she was inherited, taken to Cuba, and sold.

Froisine did not remain Maricet's slave for long. On February 1, 1805, he recorded an emancipation act with French officials in Santiago de Cuba. Due to her

[72] *Acte de Liberté donnée par le Sr. Pierre Marisset à la nommée Froisine* 10 Ventose An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-1; [Registration of documents by Froisine], 8 Prairial An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3; ANOM.

"good and loyal services," Maricet granted Froisine "all the freedoms and privileges enjoyed by freedmen in Saint-Domingue."[73] A few months later, Froisine came before the same officials to register two documents—the act of sale and the promissory note between the Ballons and Maricet. By registering these papers, Froisine created her own public record, not only of her legitimate sale from the Ballons to Maricet, but, more importantly, of her freedom. The document clearly outlines Froisine's new status when it described her as "Froisine, *negresse*, previously the slave of Sieur Pierre Maricet and freed by him by an act recorded in our report on [February 1]."[74] Having traveled to Cuba as a slave and gained her freedom once there, Froisine utilized the notary system to protect her recently (re)attained status as a free woman.

The Ballon brothers clearly did not respect the emancipation decree and wasted no time in profiting from the right to own slaves in Cuba when they sold Froisine to Pierre Maricet. Some émigré slave owners, however, recognized the precarious position in which relocation put their former slaves and attempted to guarantee these individuals' freedom in the new place. For example, François Nicolas Prevost and his wife, Marie-Madeleine Labarriere, recorded an emancipation act in Baracoa on July 12, 1808 that

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[73] *Acte de Liberté donnée par le Sr. Pierre Marisset à la nommée Froisine*. The reason Maricet gave for freeing Froisine ("good and loyal services") was commonly found in emancipation records and likely says more about the boilerplate nature of notary documents than why Maricet emancipated an enslaved woman he bought only fourteen months before. Froisine may have paid Maricet or made some arrangement to exchange labor for her freedom.

[74] [Registration of documents by Froisine]. In her 1832 will, Marie Couvent left money to a free woman of color named Phrosine Ballon. After Couvent's death five years later, Phrosine Ballon appeared before notary Louis T. Caire to claim her inheritance. Although I have yet to find evidence to prove a connection, I wonder whether Couvent's beneficiary is the same Froisine, former slave of the Ballon family, who gained her freedom from Pierre Maricet in Cuba. Interestingly, at least one of the Ballon brothers, Jean François Ballon des Ravines, relocated from Cuba to New Orleans. See *Testament de Veuve Bernard Couvent*, November 12, 1832 in Louis T. Caire, Volume 23A, page 186, NARC; [Acquittance of bequest by Louis Cheinau and Phrosine Ballon in favor of Henry Fletcher], December 22, 1837 in Carlile Pollock, Volume 56, page 321, NARC; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:19; John Adems Paxton, comp. *The New Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), microform, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA, hereafter, 1822 City Directory and HNOC.

freed the forty-year-old Marie and her two young daughters, Marie Madeleine Estelle and Rosillette. The couple explained that they had manumitted Marie six years earlier through a notary in Cap Français before evacuating the island. Because their copy of the record had been lost in the course of moving to Cuba, Prevost and Labarriere wanted "to pay tribute to the truth, and to assure the status of the so-called Marie *negresse* and of her children."[75] Through the emancipation act made in Baracoa, the couple confirm[ed] the freedom given by them to the said Marie" and bestowed freedom on Marie Madeleine Estelle and Rosilette, both of whom had been born since their mother had arrived in Cuba.[76]

The couple offered an unusually detailed explanation for manumitting the three slaves in the act recorded in Baracoa. The reasons provided illustrate the personal connection that existed between Marie and her former owners and helps to explain her motivation for leaving the island with them. Prevost and Labarriere initially emancipated Marie in 1802 before leaving Saint-Domingue because of the "good and loyal services rendered to them by [Marie] and in particular because she nursed" their daughter, Marie Madeleine Pere, "with all the zeal and care possible."[77] Upon relocating to Cuba, the couple claimed that Marie had done nothing to change their mind, but "on the contrary, she has rendered herself more worthy by following them to this country." They also pointed out that it would be "unjust" for her to know she had been given her freedom only for it to have been taken away again by moving to Cuba.[78] Marie very likely

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[75] *Acte de Liberté en faveur de Marie Negresse et de ses enfans*, July 12, 1808 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4; ANOM. "So-called" or "*la nommée/ le nommé*" was an identifier used in French notary records to indicate someone of low social class. Notaries in Saint-Domingue used it to refer to free blacks in the documents and only rarely used it to refer to whites. See King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 8.

[76] *Acte de Liberté en faveur de Marie Negresse et de ses enfans*, July 12, 1808.

[77] *Acte de Liberté en faveur de Marie Negresse et de ses enfans*, July 12, 1808.

[78] *Acte de Liberté en faveur de Marie Negresse et de ses enfans*, July 12, 1808.

considered herself a free woman as she traveled to Baracoa with her former master and mistress. Yet without a record of her emancipation in Le Cap, Marie's freedom and that of her daughters born in a place where slavery existed could be called into question. By maintaining a connection with Prevost and Labarriere, Marie secured written documentation of her emancipation and formal acknowledgement of the free status of her children.

The promise of freedom could have enticed some former slaves to remain with their owners as they evacuated the island. The manumission act for Marie Catherine *dite* Gerbine recorded in Baracoa by Joseph-Thomas Gense and his wife, Marie-Louise Guilbaud, provides one example. The couple declared that they had intended to emancipate Marie Catherine, the ten-year-old daughter of their slave, Marie-Jeanne, since her birth but that "various circumstances and notably the constantly renewed unrest in St. Domingue had always brought obstacles and delays to this project of charity."[79] Apparently feeling a sense of stability in Cuba and not wanting to wait any longer, Gense and Guilbaud proceeded to free Marie Catherine on July 16, 1808. They initially proposed to emancipate Marie Catherine as an infant "in recognition of the good services" of her mother.[80] The couple claimed that over time Marie Catherine displayed "the same character of kindness and loyalty" towards them as Marie-Jeanne and wanted to reward the child for the "daily small services" which she provided for them. Beyond her loyal assistance, Gense and Guilbaud explained that as Marie Catherine's godparents they shared a "spiritual alliance" with the young girl.[81] The personal and religious ties

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[79] *Acte de liberté M. et Mde. Gense en faveur de Me. Catherine dite Gerbine*, July 16, 1808 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4; ANOM.

[80] *Acte de liberté M. et Mde. Gense en faveur de Me. Catherine dite Gerbine.*

[81] *Acte de liberté M. et Mde. Gense en faveur de Me. Catherine dite Gerbine.*

that the couple felt connected them to Marie Catherine induced them to fulfill their plan to free her once they had resettled in Cuba. If they made their intended manumission of the enslaved child known to her and her mother, Gense and Guilbaud could have certainly used this as leverage to convince Marie-Jeanne and Marie Catherine to leave Saint-Domingue with them.

For Marie Catherine, staying with her master and mistress led to freedom. Her mother, however, remained enslaved, despite her "good services" and the fact that she left Saint-Domingue with Gense and Guilbaud. The contrasting experiences of mother and daughter demonstrate the complicated connections between masters and slaves and how, once off the island, maintaining these connections could be a double-edged sword. A promise of freedom for her daughter may have convinced Marie-Jeanne to accompany her owners to Cuba. By following through with their desire to emancipate Marie Catherine, Gense and Guilbaud ultimately strengthened their hold over Marie-Jeanne, guaranteeing her "loyalty" and placing her in their debt for the "charitable" deed they performed for her daughter. Although they lost Marie Catherine's "daily small services" as their slave, the couple continued to benefit from Marie-Jeanne's unpaid labor, reproductive abilities, and potential source of income through rent or sale.

The desire to keep her family together provided powerful motivation for Marie-Jeanne to remain with Gense and Guilbaud when they evacuated Saint-Domingue. Familial or other close personal relationships were often at the base of an individual's decision to leave the island. For some refugees, migration could also reconnect families that were separated during the Revolution. This was perhaps the case for Marie Claire, a free woman of color working as a *marchande* in Baracoa in 1807. On May 29, Marie

Claire recorded an emancipation act that liberated her daughter, Elizabeth, a twenty-two-year-old *mulatresse*. Marie Claire explained that she had previously purchased Elizabeth from Sieur and Dame de Mage in order "to make her happy and free."[82] It is unclear whether Marie Claire followed her enslaved daughter to Cuba, or if she found Elizabeth in Baracoa after losing contact with her during the war. Either way, Marie Claire's decision to migrate reunited her family and provided Elizabeth with her freedom as well.

In the process, Marie Claire found it necessary to maintain contact with her daughter's owners. After relocating, the desire to reconstitute social networks amongst refugees could be motivated by various factors. For women who left Saint-Domingue enslaved, staying connected to their masters or other refugees who knew them on the island could, like Marie Claire and Elizabeth, "make [them] happy and free." For those free women of color refugees who departed Saint-Domingue as slave owners, support from fellow refugees was often indispensable for holding onto their enslaved "property" as they moved about the Atlantic.

"...of which she finds herself currently deprived"

In the context of a revolution that destroyed the institution of slavery and many of the plantations on which it functioned in Saint-Domingue, the loss of property was an experience shared by many residents who fled. This is expressed in the documents, as most acts recorded by both white and free colored refugees concerned property ownership.[83] Some refugees arrived with a few belongings, while most left behind

[82] *Acte de liberté Marie Claire à Elizabeth*, May 29, 1807 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4, ANOM.

[83] While much of this stems from the nature of notarial documents and their legal function, many of the documents that do not directly relate to property, such as acts of notoriety, still mention or pertain to

property, including land and people they once held as slaves. Jeannette Azulima, for example, explained in her will that she had two houses in Cap Français and "several slaves that she was forced to abandon" when she left the island.[84] Soon after arriving from Santiago de Cuba to New Orleans, a free woman of color named Marie Charlotte Rolland also recorded a will. Rolland stated that her property consisted of a plantation in the Grand Bois quarter of Saint-Domingue "on which I have left eight slaves."[85] Many of these property owners believed they would one day reclaim their abandoned possessions.[86] In her will, a free woman of color named Barbe bequeathed a house and eight slaves in Jérémie to her son who remained in Port-au-Prince, stipulating that he give each of her two goddaughters a "domestic." Given that slavery no longer existed in Haiti, Barbe understood that this was a difficult request, adding, "in the case where my said slaves are returned to his possession."[87] Through property transactions, reclamations, and intended distribution in wills, free women of color connected with other Saint-Domingue refugees across the Atlantic. What they brought with them and what they left behind shaped the way they understood their dislocation and could have real consequences for how they survived in their new places of residence.

When possible free women of color "forced to depart" from their homes brought money, jewelry, papers and other personal possessions with them.[88] Upon disembarking from the Spanish schooner that carried her to Charleston, Henriette Dessources left a

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property ownership in some way. Further, the loss of property in Saint-Domingue discussed in these documents is specific to refugees.

[84] *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811.

[85] *Testament de Marie Charlotte Rolland*, April 18, 1810, Narcisse Broutin, Volume 21, page 255, NARC.

[86] White, *Encountering Revolution*, 26-27; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 52, 59-60.

[87] *Testament de Barbe*, May 11, 1811 in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 24, page 278, NARC.

[88] *Déclaration de Hen.tte Dessources*, March 23, 1810 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-10, ANOM.

small trunk on board, which later could not be located. Dessources made an official declaration regarding her lost property to the French Consulate. The trunk's contents included her linens, eight silver place settings with an extra fork, and one silver soup spoon. It also held her family papers, among them her parents' marriage contract, multiple baptism records, including her own, and two land titles. Items like clothing and silver spoons were relatively easy to carry, useful to have, and, if necessary, could be sold.[89] The personal papers Dessources brought along represented her family's life in Saint-Domingue, outlining both who they were (baptism, marriage records) and what they owned (titles). Dessources sought official recognition of her ownership for the practical purpose of hopefully reclaiming the lost items. In doing so, she created a document that became both the physical proof of the existence of absent utensils, clothing, and a trunk and a substitute record for the papers attesting to her family's wealth, history, and free status.

Dessources' missing trunk indicates the types of personal belongings free women of color carried with them. Additionally, a number of free refugees of color managed to travel with individuals whom they had previously held as slaves. Some former owners took advantage of relocating to places where slavery existed to claim fellow refugees as their property upon arriving.[90] Rosalie Chesneau abandoned ten former slaves when she moved to Baracoa, but she brought along five women over whom she continued to claim ownership. One woman was a laundress and another was a "cake peddler," occupations which transferred easily to urban locales where slavery persisted. While in Cuba, one of

[89] White, *Encountering Revolution,* 26.
[90] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 51.

the women had a daughter, further increasing Chesneau's work force.[91] As property, these women provided capital and labor for Chesneau to survive in her new home. As people, they offered a personal connection to what was left behind. The women remained in Chesneau's possession when she relocated again to New Orleans in 1809. Over time, each one gained her freedom, and a few were named as legatees in Chesneau's will.[92]

Outside of Saint-Domingue, claims to freedom based only on the 1794 emancipation decree left the status of people of African descent open to question and easily jeopardized.[93] Women like Fanchette and Marguerite Caillou, who could gather the necessary paperwork and witnesses to prove their freedom—by birth or by manumission from a former master—could challenge attempts to label them as slaves. Likewise, documentation aided former property owners, like Rosalie Chesneau, to claim entitlement over former bondsmen and -women. Thus, as Rebecca Scott argues, the line between slavery and freedom for refugees of color could be "paper thin."[94]

Free women of color who had joined the ranks of slave owners prior to the Revolution were quick to marshal their resources, both paper and human, to re-secure their rights over "enslaved" individuals lost in the midst of relocation. They recorded declarations to prove their ownership of the slave in question and procuration acts to authorize a third party to retrieve their "property." By creating such acts, free women of

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[91] *Inventaire des biens dependant de la Succession de feu Rosalie Chesneau*, September 9, 1833; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau,* January 25, 1810; *Vente d'esclave par Rosalie Chesneau à Marie Zilia neg.sse lib.*, April 10, 1832.

[92] Chesneau recorded multiple wills between 1810 and 1833. Each will included the emancipation of the enslaved women she brought with her, but this did not go into effect until she died. In the interim years, Chesneau freed two of the five women. The other three did not receive their freedom until after Chesneau's death. Chesneau's ownership and emancipation of these five women will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

[93] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 43, 50, 70; Scott, "Paper Thin," 1063, 1073, 1077-1078.

[94] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 48; Scott, "Paper Thin," especially 1075-1007, 1080-1081, 1086; Scott,
"She...Refuses," especially 133-134.

color actively sought to protect their interests, as slaves provided labor and oft-needed income through hiring out or sale. These women also worked to maintain their position as property owners. Property holding not only indicated a level of economic success but also non-slave status for people of African descent.[95] To achieve these ends, free women of color often relied on refugee networks across locations.

On March 26, 1804, Marie Jeanne Thomas, a *mulatresse libre* from Jérémie, recorded a declaration in Santiago de Cuba to "formally protest" another refugee's claims on her slaves. According to Thomas, Mr. François Duthil said he owned Marie Joseph and her two young sons in a recent census of Saint-Dominguans in the city. Thomas was "ignorant of the motive that guided" Duthil to make such a claim, since the three slaves were born on her plantation and she had therefore always owned them.[96] To prove her ownership, Thomas presented three witnesses from her district that testified to the truth of her declaration. She could then provide their recorded statements as evidence to counter Duthil's attempt to divest her of what she considered to be her property.

Marie Jeanne Thomas surely felt that Duthil threatened her property rights. In this case, the slaves in question remained in Santiago de Cuba where their physical proximity made it easier to challenge Duthil's assertions of ownership. Other free women of color were separated from their slaves and attempted to reclaim them by relying on transnational refugee networks. On January 5, 1805 Cècile Charlesteguy declared her ownership rights of an enslaved thirteen-year-old named Jean Baptiste *dit* La Guerre.

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[95] In Louisiana, under American rule, free people of color could own property whereas enslaved individuals could not.

[96] *Déclaration de la nommée M.ie J.ne Thomas mulatresse libre & acte de notoriété sur le fait de cette déclaration*, 5 Germinal An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3, ANOM. Evidence from New Orleans Sacramental Records suggests that Duthil was the father of Marie Jeanne Thomas' granddaughter. See Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 11:160.

Jean Baptiste was the son of Charlesteguy's slave, Charlotte, which likely explains why she did not have any proof of her ownership and needed third-party testimonies to attest to this fact. Charlesteguy explained that because "she finds herself currently deprived" of her property she requires this document to fulfill her "intention to reclaim it."[97] The recovery was difficult since Charlesteguy was in Santiago de Cuba and Jean Baptiste was in New Orleans. In order to regain possession of Jean Baptiste, Charlesteguy authorized "*Sieur* Marc Lafitte, resident in New Orleans" to act in her stead, taking the legal actions necessary to return her enslaved property.[98] Lafitte was a refugee who resettled in New Orleans and worked as a notary between 1810 and 1826.[99]

Cècile Charlesteguy was not the only free women of color to lose a slave in the midst of evacuating from Saint-Domingue. Marie Louise Didier *Veuve* Renaud a *mulatresse libre* from St. Marc also recorded a declaration in Santiago de Cuba on November 5, 1804. The document asserted her claim of ownership over a boy named Rossignol Bacú. According to Didier, the twelve-year-old creole had been transported from Port-au-Prince to Môle Saint-Nicolas a few days before the French troops evacuated, where he was placed in the care of Dame Viard. Before Viard departed for Cuba, a French military aide named Baubin seized Rossignol and took him to Havana. There, under false license, Baubin sold Rossignol to Jean Jarreau. By the time Didier had been alerted to Rossignol's fate, Jarreau had taken him to Louisiana. In the interest of reclaiming her property, the declaration included three statements from residents of St.

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[97] *Déclaration sur les droits de propriété de la nommée Cécile Charlesteguy sur le nègre Jean Baptiste dit La Guerre*, 15 Nivôse An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-1.

[98] *Procuration de la nommée Cécile Charlesteguy au Sieur Marc Lafitte*, 15 Nivôse An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-1.

[99] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 50; "Notaries 1731-1970," New Orleans Notarial Archives, accessed February 19, 2012, http://www.notarialarchives.org/Notaries/listl.htm.

Marc that confirmed Didier as "the true and only owner" of Rossignol.[100] Whether or not she successfully recovered possession of Rossignol, Didier reinforced her own free status by recording her title to rights over the boy.

Didier's saga highlights the dispossession that former slave-owning refugees experienced as well as the extreme vulnerability of those formerly enslaved refugees, like Rossignol. It also illustrates how opportunities for deceit were rife in the chaos of the final evacuation of Saint-Domingue. Didier claimed that Baubin sold Rossignol to Jarreau using fake documents. Jarreau, in turn, practiced his own deception in bringing Rossignol to New Orleans. On June 18, 1804, he sold the slave he acquired in Havana to Jean Tournoir. Rather than describing Rossignol as a creole, the sale record lists him as "*brut*," meaning a recent African import.[101] Jarreau likely lied to conceal Rossignol's origins in a ploy that enabled him to enter New Orleans with a Saint-Domingue slave. Louisiana Territorial Governor William C. C. Claiborne explained to James Madison in 1804 that "[s]laves are daily introduced from Africa, many *direct* from *this* unhappy Country and others by way of the West India Islands. All vessels with slaves on bord [*sic*] are stopped at Plaquemine [*sic*], and are not permitted to pass without my consent. This is done to prevent the bringing in of Slaves that have been concerned in the insurrections of St. Domingo [*sic*]..."[102] Cècile Charlesteguy and Marie Louise Didier discovered that despite laws forbidding their importation, the illicit trade in slaves from Saint-Domingue found a market in New Orleans.[103]

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[100] *Déclaration de Marie Louise Didier Vve. Renaud*, 14 Frimaire An 13 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-3.

[101] Slave Sale between Jean Jarreau and Jean Tournoir, June 18, 1804, in Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy 1699-1860*, accessed February 11, 2012, http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=34450, hereafter, Slave Database.

[102] Quoted in Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 199.

[103] Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 175.

Not all free women of color were separated from people they claimed as slaves through deceptive means. On April 21, 1808, Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat authorized Louis Gillet, another refugee in Baracoa, to recover two slaves that she inherited from her mother. The slaves had been in Charleston since 1804 when Fortunat's mother entrusted them to Sieur Darquier to rent out for her financial benefit. To claim her property, Fortunat needed an agent in the American city. Since Gillet was soon to depart for Charleston, Marie Genevieve gave him the legal power to procure the slaves from Darquier. If he refused to return them, Fortunat authorized Gillet to take legal action. However, she also permitted him to sell the slaves to Darquier for a price "most favorable" to her.[104] That she was willing to sell her inheritance suggests Fortunat may have struggled financially in Baracoa and needed the revenue. Fortunat's act of procuration also reveals her participation in local and transnational networks that connected white, free colored, and enslaved Saint-Domingue refugees in and across relocation points. Through associations formed first through her mother, Fortunat depended on these relationships and the movement of refugees between locales to better survive her migration experience.

Friends and Neighbors

Social networks among refugees are visible throughout the documents recorded by free women of color in Cuba, Charleston, and New Orleans. As Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat's procuration act illustrates, these networks were both local and transnational. Associations among refugees, based on face-to-face interactions, helped

[104] *Procuration par Dlle Me Gve Fortunat à M Gillet*, April 21, 1808 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-4, ANOM.

individuals find jobs, secure housing, and subsist on limited resources.[105] After arriving in New Orleans from Cuba, Barbe settled in a house with Marie Catherine Bourguignon, another free woman of color from Saint-Domingue. It is unclear how the two women knew each other, but in naming Marie Catherine testamentary executor in her will, Barbe clearly trusted her housemate to manage her affairs after her death. Barbe owned no property in New Orleans and likely struggled while there. In her will, she claimed to owe $16.00 to a baker named François Lavigne. Not only was Lavigne also a refugee, his bakery was located only a block away from Barbe and Bourguignon's residence. To get by, Barbe relied on her close neighbors with ties that reached back to Saint-Domingue.[106]

Local networks also provided support in other ways. In many of the documents discussed above, the loss of previous documentation required claimants to produce alternative proofs of status or property ownership. In these instances, witnesses came forth to record sworn statements to attest to the truth of the claim. When Marguerite Caillou needed evidence that she had been born free she had three men living in Santiago de Cuba who knew her in St. Marc to verify her status.[107] The legal procedure of oral corroboration by associates carried over to Cuba from Saint-Domingue.[108] In New Orleans, this means of verification in the absence of written proof was made explicit in an 1807 law that required a refugee of color to "prove his or her said freedom" before city officials "by credible testimonies."[109] What may have been a precaution on the part of

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[105] Meadows, "Engineering Exile," 81-83; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 46-47, 50; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 30; *Testament de Barbe*, May 11, 1811.

[106] *Testament de Barbe*, May 11, 1811; Evidence from New Orleans sacramental records suggests that Barbe could have known Lavigne in Saint-Domingue as well. See Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10: 273.

[107] *Déclaration La Liberté de Marguerite Caillou*, 5 Brumaire An 13.

[108] See, for example, *Notoriété pour le n.e Pre Gilles*, September 9, 1788, Grimperel, SDOM-870, ANOM.

[109] Quoted in Scott, "She...Refuses," 120-121.

Caillou in Cuba would become a necessity in New Orleans. In both places, refugees' ability to access a social network served as a valuable asset.

Networks also connected refugees across national borders. Fortunat's mother sent her slaves to Charleston with Darquier, while Fortunat took advantage of Gillet's intended trip to the city to retrieve them. When Cècile Charlesteguy needed help recovering her slave in New Orleans she called upon Marc Lafitte, a refugee who had already relocated to the Crescent City, to procure her property. These relationships connected refugees across long distances and paved the way for continued business connections as well as future relocations.

Assistance with relocations proved particularly important for refugees in Cuba, as so many of them continued on to New Orleans when the Spanish dispelled them from the colony. A group of refugees from Verrettes provides one example. With few plantations and inhabitants, Verrettes remained a frontier area on the eve of the Revolution.[110] Due to its small size, it is likely that most people from this parish knew of each other and utilized these connections, first in Cuba, and then later in New Orleans. In her attempt to rescue her nephew from enslavement in Louisiana, Marie Françoise Lambert needed proof that Romain was free. She assembled four men from her own parish of Verrettes, including a free man of color named Henry Guilhou to testify to Romain's status. Both Lambert and Guilhou relocated to New Orleans in 1809. While Lambert died soon after moving, Guilhou was listed as a tailor in the 1822 City Directory.[111] He lived with François Verdry, another free black refugee from St. Marc. In his will, Verdry named Guilhou

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[110] John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 26.

[111] 1822 City Directory; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:260; *Enquête pour constater l'etat civil du nommé Romain,* November 23, 1808.

executor of his estate.[112] François Verdry's connections to Verrettes extended beyond his friendship with Guilhou. In 1815, he served as godfather to the son of Pierre Herve, from Verrettes, and Marguerite Menard, a native of St. Marc.[113]

If former inhabitants of Verrettes parish maintained social connections that began in Saint-Domingue and continued in Cuba and New Orleans, other free refugees of color created new ties in their places of refuge. From different regions of Saint-Domingue, Rosalie Chesneau and Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat likely did not meet until they relocated to Baracoa.[114] Upon leaving Cuba, however, the relationship they created through business arrangements continued even after they went their separate ways.

While in Baracoa, Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat borrowed money from Rosalie Chesneau. By June 1, 1808, she had yet to repay the debt but planned to leave the island. Unsure if she would survive the trip, Fortunat left three female slaves with Chesneau and granted her permission to sell them in order to satisfy the loan. If the sale of the slaves made more money than what Fortunat owed Chesneau, she was instructed to give the surplus funds to Fortunat's brother and sister.[115] This suggests that Fortunat's family was with her in Baracoa, as well.

In May 1814 Rosalie Chesneau registered an act of procuration with a notary in New Orleans. Granting Chesneau power of attorney, the act was recorded by Marie Genevieve Fortunat on August 7, 1813 and passed in Jérémie, a town in the southern part

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[112] *Testament de François Verdry,* July 21, 1820 in Acts of C. de Armas, Volume 3, Act 165, page 271, NARC.

[113] Nolan, *Sacramental Record,* 11:218. The names Herve and Menard also connect back to Lambert. Her nephew's *dit* name was Louis Hervé, and she gave power of attorney to Sieur Rocheville de Menard to retrieve her nephew.

[114] Rosalie Chesneau was from Jean Rabel in the North, whereas Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat lived in Jérémie in the South. See *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau*, January 25, 1810 and *Procuration par Dlle Me Gve Fortunat à M Gillet*, April 21, 1808.

[115] *Rosalie Chaineau Enregt de pièce*, May 26, 1821.

of the now-independent Haiti.[116] On June 13, 1814, Chesneau once again returned to the notary office in New Orleans with Fortunat's brother to record a document that acknowledged his recent receipt of $848—his share of the inheritance from his mother—given to him by Chesneau.[117] How Chesneau acquired these funds remains unclear, but evidently Fortunat trusted Chesneau to manage her affairs in New Orleans. Not only did these women remain in contact after leaving Cuba for Louisiana and Haiti, they continued to utilize the notary system to do so. Chesneau and Fortunat's relationship exemplifies the connections among people, places, and property created by the movement of free women of color refugees in the Age of Revolutions.

Fleeing the war-torn island, Saint-Domingue free women of color left a variety of recorded documents in their wake. The loss of personal papers, property, and, indeed, the proof of their previous lives necessitated the creation of such records. Women of color refugees sought protection in documentation of their status as free women and for many, as property owners. While some women utilized notary records to defend their freedom, others used them to reclaim their property rights over their former slaves. In both enterprises, the connections created and maintained by these women in the course of their movement were vital to substantiate their assertions. The documents that free women of color deposited, recorded, and created are tangible evidence of individual struggles for rights and property against a backdrop of revolution. However "thin," the papers convey elaborate efforts, which mobilized refugee networks across time and sea. Tracing the

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[116] *Dépôt de pièce par Rosalie Chesneau*, May 12, 1814, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 8, Act 231, page 123, NARC.

[117] *Quittance Jn. Bte. Braud à Rosalie Chesneau*, June 13, 1814, Acts M. de Armas, Volume 8, Act 325, page 171, NARC.

contours of migration for Saint-Domingue free women of color reveals the ways these women actively created and recreated meaningful lives in the face of dislocation.

Marie Justine Sirnir surely shared some of the same concerns and faced similar challenges in her own journey from Cap Français to New Orleans. Like Fanchette and Zaire, Sirnir was a formerly enslaved, African-born woman whose freedom could have been called into question after disembarking in Louisiana's slave society. Although she does not seem to have registered freedom papers, Sirnir was likely aware of her vulnerability in relocating to a new place. The timing of her arrival in New Orleans with the Mauraus in 1804, however, may have alleviated some of the threats to her free status. In contrast to women like Rosalie Chesneau who traveled to the city from Cuba in 1809, Sirnir came earlier and with a much smaller group of émigrés. Those refugees arriving in 1804 caused little concern to United States government officials preoccupied with their recent command of the territory.[118] Even so, the close connections Sirnir maintained with the Mauraus in New Orleans point to a strategy of having people who could vouch for her, if need be.

Confirming her freedom to New Orleans authorities may have never proved necessary, but Sirnir continued to rely on her association with the Mauraus as a source of support. Over time, she formed new relationships in the city as well. To these social networks, Sirnir added another form of security—property ownership. She bought land, slaves, and material goods during the three decades she lived in New Orleans. Her pursuit of property brought Sirnir in contact with various people in the urban space of the growing city. These transactions also required notarized documents, producing a record of Sirnir's endeavors in New Orleans. Marie Justine Sirnir and free women of color

[118] Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans*, 25-26.

refugees like her utilized social networks and property ownership to not only rebuild their lives in the Crescent City but contribute to the development of a Francophone free people of color community there.

CHAPTER FOUR
To Have and to Hold: Owning People

My properties consist of...the slaves named Seraphine aged about thirty-one years and her young negro child Noel ten months old, Sophie negress aged thirty-five years with her young negress child named Simonette, of three years, and the negro Bernard of fifty-six years.

- The Testament of Marie Justine Sirnir called Esther
October 26, 1812

... being seriously ill, Ester, free black woman, who by word and mutual promise of marriage, had cohabitated with Bernard, a black man also free, whose freedom the above-mentioned sick woman had bought...

- Marriage Record of Bernard and Ester
October 27, 1812

When she recorded her first will in 1812 Marie Justine Sirnir owned five enslaved individuals: Seraphine and her son, Noel; Sophie and her daughter, Simonette; and a middle-aged man named Bernard. She did not leave specific instructions in her will for Sophie or Simonette after her death. As part of her estate, these two slaves likely would have been sold to cover any debts Sirnir may have accumulated, if she had died.[1] Since Sirnir did not pass away in 1812 she continued to own Sophie until January 12, 1829 when she sold the fifty-year-old woman to Francisco Brunetti.[2] It is unclear what happened to Simonette. While the full dynamics of their long relationship cannot be known, Sirnir's testament plans (or lack thereof) and later sale of Sophie suggest an economic relationship bereft of sentimental attachment.

Sirnir undoubtedly considered slave ownership a legitimate financial investment. Her second will, made in 1832, also listed five slaves, albeit five *different* people than those listed in the 1812 document.[3] In the twenty years between recording her two testaments, Sirnir frequently bought and sold enslaved men, women, and children. She

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[1] *Testament*, 1812.

[2] *Vente d'esclave Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de B.d du Couvent à Francisco Brunetti*, January 12, 1829, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 6, Act 32, NARC.

[3] *Testament*, 1832.

was even in the process of buying another slave at the time of her death. Whether as a purchase, a sale, or a mortgage, the majority of the transactions in which Simir was involved concerned human property in some way. In total, Sinir bought, sold, or acquired by birth (by enslaved mothers), at least twenty-five slaves over the three decades she lived in New Orleans.[4]

A close examination of Simir's slaveholding, however, indicates that she owned slaves for reasons that extended beyond the economic. The intentions she laid out for the other three slaves in her 1812 will imply a different relationship than the one Simir had with Sophie. Simir proclaimed that on the day of her death Seraphine, Noel, and Bernard would be freed for their "good and loyal service."[5] The generic reason provided for their emancipations obscures the strong personal ties Simir developed with these three slaves. Additional evidence reveals that over time Simir created a family with Bernard, Seraphine, and Seraphine's children.

Owning, buying, and selling slaves served as a viable and, indeed, vital economic strategy for Marie Justine Simir to build a successful life in the Crescent City. Slaveholding allowed her to accumulate wealth through various means. She benefitted from enslaved individuals' unpaid domestic work and earned income through rented or other types of productive labor. She profited by selling slaves for more than the original

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[4] *Testament*, 1812; *Testament*, 1832; Acts of N. Broutin, March 20, 1810, 22:169, February 14, 1811, 25:46, February 2, 1815, 32:5, January 19, 1816, 34:39, and October 27, 1818, 37:360; Acts of M. de Armas, September 2, 1811, 6:433; Acts of M. Lafitte, April 27, 1818, 12:205 and October 20, 1823, 24:356; Acts of L. T. Caire, January 29, 1829, 6:34; Acts of C. Pollock, March 13, 1837, 56:71, NARC; *St. Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 9, Part 2: 1831-1832, no. 2055, AANO. Twenty-five is an estimate based on the notary and sacramental records that have been located. There are a few records in which it is difficult to determine if the party involved is actually Marie Justine Simir Couvent due to spellings and handwriting. There are also some individuals who may have been born slaves but then lived as free people, without official freedom. All of these specific cases will be discussed in more detail below.

[5] *Testament*, 1812.

purchase price or from selling a child born to an enslaved woman in her household. She also could have used her slaves as collateral to secure debts, although she seemed to have preferred to borrow against her landed rather than human property.[6] When Sirnir died in 1837 the appraisers valued her five slaves at $3,000. This amount comprised 15.66 percent of her estate's total worth.[7]

If most of the slaves Sirnir owned clearly served the purpose of providing her household with labor and capital, the select few with whom she formed a personal connection offered Sirnir another strategy for survival and success. Sirnir utilized her legal right to own slaves to create a support system that was both economic and familial. As we will see, Sirnir formed and sustained kinship ties with some of her slaves through marriage, baptisms, emancipations, and bequests. Taken as a whole, Sirnir's slave ownership illustrates the broad spectrum on which free black slaveholding in New Orleans fell.

This chapter examines the overlapping motivations for Marie Justine Sirnir's slaveholding from various perspectives. As a free woman of color in New Orleans, Sirnir was one of a significant segment of the free black population that actively participated in the institution of slavery as buyers, sellers, and owners in the city. As a Saint-Domingue refugee, Sirnir joined many of her fellow refugees in utilizing slaves as a valuable resource in their attempts to rebuild their lives (and fortunes) after relocating to New

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[6] In her study of the economic importance of mortgaging human property in the South, Bonnie Martin discusses two types of mortgages. An equity mortgage was one in which money can be borrowed against property already owned. A purchase-money mortgage was one placed on the property being bought until it was paid for in full. There are no examples of Sirnir using an enslaved individual as collateral for an equity mortgage, but she often purchased slaves using a purchase-money mortgage. See Bonnie Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine: Mortgaging Human Property," *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 78, No. 4, (November 2010): 821-823.

[7] Inventory for Estate of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow of Bernard Couvent, July 15, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 1, pages 381-385, NARC.

Orleans. These two groups were often the same. A large proportion of free women of color in the city were Saint-Domingue refugees, especially after 1809. Consequently, these women formed an important sector of slaveholders there.[8] Refugee women of African descent brought ideas about slave ownership with them from the island and applied these ideas to what they found in New Orleans. Yet, not all free women of color refugees were former slaves of African birth like Sirnir. Her experience of slavery in Le Cap likely shaped her understanding of slaveholding in ways that differed from women who had been born free. Thus, viewing Sirnir's patterns of slave ownership through these multiple lenses is critical to evaluating her decision to own this type of property. To provide points of comparison, I use primary and secondary sources on free people of color slave owning in both Saint-Domingue and New Orleans.

Sirnir's slaveholding practices indicate a multivalent understanding of slave ownership that highlights the complicated relationship between property ownership and kinship in a slave society. This complex web of association and exploitation that arose when people were also property had direct consequences for the development of a free black community in New Orleans as the center of slavery moved to the Deep South. Like owning land, free people of color could point to their slave ownership as evidence of their free status, and, in turn, distance themselves from slavery.[9] Moreover, slave ownership challenged white assumptions of racial solidarity across status lines, allowing free people

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[8] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 83, 85.

[9] Kenneth Aslakson and Virginia Gould both found examples of court cases in which property ownership was cited as one form of evidence in an individual's attempt to prove her freedom. In the 1859 case Gould examined, a witness stated, in support of the freedom claim, that the couple "passed everywhere as free, hired themselves, bought and sold as free persons, paid their own money for purchases made." Additionally, Aslakson suggests that property ownership was one factor that likely aided Pauline Berton in her successful freedom suit. He compares this case to that of Caroline, who lost. Unlike Berton, Caroline did not have such markers of freedom as a surname or property. See Aslakson, "Making Race," 82-83; Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 112.

of color to make explicit distinctions between themselves and enslaved people as a group.[10] Unlike owning land, however, owning a person involved a relationship—a highly unequal relationship, but a relationship nonetheless—between property and owner. As people, some even family members, slaves complicated those same distinctions based on status. An examination of free black slaveholding, then, discloses the complexities of creating a community amid competing divisions and alliances along racial, status, and kinship lines.

The Expansion of Slavery into the Deep South

Slave-owning offered Marie Justine Sirnir and free women of color refugees like her a practical economic strategy, in part, because their arrival coincided with the expansion of slavery in the region. Starting in the 1790s, slavery began to extend into areas to the west and south of the US' lower east coast states. Agricultural developments and the opening of lands fueled this expansion. The invention of the cotton gin and advances in sugar production accelerated the growth of these crops, which required land and labor. Between 1790 and 1820, the United States acquired vast amounts of new territory, both by force and by cessions from the Spanish, British, French and various Native American governments. Settlers moving into the "southern frontier" wanted enslaved labor to clear the land and tend to their plantations while established planters in these areas desired additions to their work forces in order to increase production.[11]

Not everyone was eager to populate the newly-acquired lands with slaves. Lawmakers intensely debated the extension of slavery into these zones. The Northwest

[10] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 165; Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 65- 66.
[11] Rothman, *Slave Country,* x-xi, 4, 9-10, 16-17, 28, 34-35, 40-42, 138-139; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5.

Ordinance, adopted in 1787, was the first legislation concerning the organization of territories. The law allowed slavery in the lands below the Ohio River, but barred it anywhere north of the river. The addition of the Mississippi Territory in 1795 and the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 brought the debate once again to the fore, as Congress attempted to organize these new areas. In both instances, a "diffusioninst" policy was enacted, which permitted settlers to bring their slaves with them when they relocated to the territory but forbade the importation of foreign slaves.[12]

The ban on the importation of slaves from outside the United States had been in place on a state-by-state basis since the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. The large-scale slave uprising on the island created widespread fear of the United States' own enslaved population. Americans' horror at what was unfolding in the French colony intensified when Saint-Domingue refugees disembarked in US ports with first-hand accounts of the war. The fact that a number of these free refugees arrived with their slaves in tow only exacerbated the situation. The fear of domestic revolts appeared to be legitimated when several plots were uncovered in the Upper South between 1799 and 1802, the most notable being Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia in 1800. These events convinced many people—slave owners and non-slave owners, alike—to support the prohibition of the slave trade, particularly the importation of slaves from the Caribbean.[13]

At the same time, the risk of revolution strengthened the diffusionists' argument for allowing slavery to expand beyond the original thirteen colonies. Dispersing the enslaved population among a large geographic expanse, the idea went, was safer than high concentrations of enslaved people, particularly where people of African descent

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[12] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 18-19, 24-26, 27-34, 30-32.

[13] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 19, 21-22; James McMillin, *The Final Victims: Foreign Slave Trade to North America, 1783-1810* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 97-98.

outnumbered whites. Adam Rothman explains that "diffusionism promised to insulate the United States from black Jacobinism while allowing market forces within the country to transplant the native-born slave population into the southwest, where slavery was daily becoming more profitable." Proponents of this policy anticipated that it would effectively dilute the potential power of the enslaved population and some hoped it would lead to the gradual end of slavery.[14]

Ultimately, however, diffusionism served to strengthen slavery's hold in the Lower South. Federal legislation permanently closed the international slave trade in 1808 after its brief renewal in 1804. Yet, cotton and sugar remained extremely profitable and land remained plentiful. This sustained a high demand for slaves, which was met by the interstate trade in enslaved blacks from the Upper South where exhausted tobacco land diminished their necessity. With its prime location on the Mississippi River, New Orleans rapidly grew into a major commercial and financial center. Merchants in the city handled the increasing amounts in trade of plantation crops, manufactured goods, and enslaved men, women, and children. By the end of the territorial period, New Orleans contained the largest slave market in the United States.[15]

Saint-Domingue refugees not only benefited from the expansion of slavery, they played an important role in the process. Sugar cultivation began to flourish in lower Louisiana in the 1790s as a result of events in Saint-Domingue. Once the world's top sugar producer, the French colony lost that distinction, along with much of its infrastructure in the destruction caused by the Haitian Revolution. Refugees from the colony arrived in Louisiana and applied their sugar-making expertise to the region.

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[14] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 24-25, 30.

[15] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 24, 83, 188; Aslakson, "Making Race," 55, 60; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2, 4-6.

Louisiana quickly joined other places like Brazil and Jamaica in filling the gap in the market left by Saint-Domingue.[16] Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, a refugee who published an account of his travels around the Gulf South in 1802, testified to the impact Saint-Dominguans had made on Louisiana's plantation economy: "It has been seven or eight years since the first sugar establishments were made in the colony, and it owes its principal advantage to the calamities of St. Domingo, which raised the demand for sugar from Louisiana, and sent many planters and workmen of that unhappy island to seek a settlement on the Mississippi."[17] Significantly, Berquin-Duvallon's assessment of the role of refugees in the rise of sugar plantations in lower Louisiana identified both plantation owners and plantation slaves as key purveyors of knowledge concerning sugar manufacture.

In addition to aiding sugar production in Louisiana, Saint-Domingue refugees played a role in the expansion of slavery in the Deep South as slave owners, slave buyers and sellers, and slave traders. As discussed in Chapter Three, both white and free black slave owners from Saint-Domingue went to great lengths to recover their human property in the midst of migration. Settling somewhere that allowed enslaved individuals to remain in their possession was just as important to these Saint-Dominguans.[18] Those refugees traveling with individuals whom they, at least, considered to still be slaves had a ready resource of labor and capital. Many free refugees considered owning slaves as critical to their survival and thus looked to the Louisiana territorial government and New Orleans' municipal authorities to recognize their ownership. Some Saint-Dominguans

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[16] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 75-76; Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans,* 79-81.

[17] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 75-76; Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the Year 1802, Giving a Correct Picture of Those Countries*, trans. John Davis (New York: I. Riley and Co., 1806), 128.

[18] Lachance, "Repercussions," 213, 223-224; Peabody, "Free Upon Higher Ground," 262, 272-273.

took their claims of ownership of other refugees to court, they rented out or sold those whom they managed to continue to hold in bondage, and they bought and sold slaves in the burgeoning New Orleans' market in order to rebuild their lives in the city.[19]

Pierre Collette, a white planter from Jean Rabel, explained this position to fellow refugee Stanislas Foäche in an 1804 letter. Collette evacuated Cap Français in 1803 and proceeded to Spanish Santo Domingo but was forced to travel to Cuba instead. He spent nine months in Santiago de Cuba but did not find it to his liking. Collette wrote:

> Cast upon Cuba with a few domestics as my only resource, not sure of being able to keep them for long because of the ease with which the Negroes can escape from their master, no longer being able to rent them, life, as miserable as it was here, was still very expensive. Shanties command exorbitant rents because of the great number of refugees. All of this finally led me to cast my lot with other counties [sic] and [I began to] seek the one that would suit me the best. I believed that Louisiana was the one offering the greatest advantages to unfortunate colonists forced to flee their island. First of all, the same language is spoken there, [and] the remnants of our Negroes are worth a lot more money, for they command much higher rental fees. Ownership of them is more secure. Second, the same habits are to be found there. You are more or less known by Frenchmen, either personally or by reputation; there are more or less the same crops; and a climate that is not very different from ours. I was not mistaken. I found here what I was hoping to find, and my only regret was not having come sooner..."[20]

When choosing a place to settle Collette looked for somewhere that felt familiar. In New Orleans, he found a shared language, culture, and climate as well as a steadily growing refugee population among the city's other French-born residents with common social or commercial connections. Just as important to Collette, however, was an environment in which he could maintain his position of power over his "few domestics" without fear of them running away. He sought a society in which his property rights in people were

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[19] Scott, "Paper Thin," 1074, 1087; Aslakson, "Making Race," 77-78; Lachance, "Repercussions," 223-224; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 261.

[20] Quoted in Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 235-236.

protected and where he could realize the most value from his "only resource." In this regard, New Orleans fit the bill.

Pierre Collette earned revenue by renting out his slaves. He applied that income towards food and lodging for his household, which included his wife and daughter, his black housekeeper and her two children, and eighteen enslaved individuals.[21] Despite the "higher rental fees" for slaves in New Orleans, Collette "lived meagerly." He apparently supplemented the income earned by his rented domestics with gambling, which eventually placed him in debt.[22] Perhaps this is why he resorted to selling one of his slaves to Eugenie Maurau on September 29, 1810. Maurau purchased a seventeen-year-old *negresse* named Beatrix for 550 *piastres*. The sale act described Beatrix as "belonging to the seller as being a creole of his plantation on St. Domingue."[23] In his desperation, Pierre Collette may have not cared to whom he sold Beatrix. On the other hand, he possibly felt more comfortable selling an individual born on his own plantation to a fellow refugee.

Unlike Collette, Jean Maurau and his wife Eugenie did not seem to bring any "slaves" with them from Saint-Domingue to New Orleans. Once they arrived in the city, however, the couple took full advantage of their relocation to a slave society, as owners, buyers, and sellers of human property. In fact, the earliest documentation of Jean Maurau in New Orleans is a slave sale recorded by the notary Pierre Pedesclaux on November 15,

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[21] Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 234. At least two of the slaves belonged to Collette's housekeeper, Guinoterre Pincemaille. Apparently, Collette sold these slaves without Pincemaille's permission. She sued his estate in 1819. See Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 194.

[22] Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," quote on 234, 238.

[23] *Vente d'esclave par Pre Collette à Eugenie Moreau*, September 29, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 21, page 173, NARC. *Piastres* and dollars were equal in value. The term used depended on the language in which the document was recorded. See Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 164, note to Table 5.

1804. Maurau sold an enslaved woman name Maria to Pedro de Torres for $475.00.[24] According to the document, Maurau bought Maria from Pedro Gordillo and Francisco Solomon in May of that year. This sale indicates that by May 1804 the Mauraus were in the city with enough capital to buy an adult female slave. The purchase and subsequent sale of Maria only seven months later formed the first of many such transactions undertaken by Jean Maurau and his wife, Eugenie, over the next few years. Undoubtedly, Jean Maurau utilized slave trading as an important strategy for accumulating income, building credit, and re-establishing himself as a *marchand* in New Orleans.

The timing of the couple's relocation to the recently-acquired Orleans Territory fell during the final years in which the transatlantic slave trade remained legal in the United States. Between 1804 and 1808 an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 slaves disembarked in Louisiana from other parts of the United States, the Caribbean, and especially Africa. As the January 1, 1808 deadline for the prohibition of all foreign importations of slaves drew near, merchants, planters, and other individuals with the necessary means made the most of an opportunity by funding slaving voyages to the African coast, transshipping incoming "cargoes" from South Carolina to Louisiana, and selling the newly-imported Africans. The Mauraus purchased and sold at least thirteen slaves from ships arriving from Africa via Charleston between 1806 and 1810.[25] As Rothman points out, "These Africans were among the last human beings legally imported into the United States as

[24] *Vte Real*, November 15, 1805, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 48, page 1081, NARC.

[25] Acts of N. Broutin, August 20, 1807, 17:83; November 18, 1806, 14:91; December 1, 1806, 14:105; February 21, 1807, 14:181; March 14, 1807, 14: 203; April 10, 1807, 15:77; June 30, 1807, 16:159; October 2, 1807, 17:149; April 11, 1808, 18:121; July 5, 1808, 18:254; April 3, 1810, 22:248; April 3, 1810, 22:249; July 18, 1810, 13:147; NARC. Nine of these sales specifically mention Charleston.

slaves and among the first to be shipped from the eastern seaboard to the Deep South through the coastal trade."[26]

The Mauraus benefited from a political situation that had its roots in the compromises made at the 1787 Constitutional Convention to resolve the vehement debates over slavery's future in the new republic. Arguments over regulation of the transatlantic slave trade were settled by an agreement that Congress could not ban the importation of slaves for twenty years.[27] This was not an automatic deadline; rather, the federal government could not take any action towards prohibition of the trade until that time. Georgia and North Carolina were the only states that allowed the importation of slaves in 1787. However, fear of importing a revolution along with foreign slaves followed the outbreak of insurrection in Saint-Domingue. By 1798, the trade was closed in all states and remained that way until South Carolina lifted its ban on the transatlantic slave trade in 1803.[28]

Because Louisiana did not become part of the United States until 1803, the importation of slaves in New Orleans followed a different tack. In 1786 the Spanish regime outlawed the introduction of creole Caribbean slaves but allowed transshipments of African-born slaves initially landed in the islands. During the Haitian Revolution, additional restrictions were made until slave importations were completely banned in 1796. Four years later, planter persistence revived the foreign slave trade in New Orleans and it continued under France's brief return to rule. The Louisiana Purchase placed New

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[26] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 86.

[27] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 9, 97; Rothman, *Slave Country,* 4.

[28] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 56-57, 97-98; Rothman, *Slave Country,* 8. South Carolina had reopened the trade after the American Revolution but suspended it in 1787 due to an economic downturn. In 1803 the state legislature voted to reopen the trade. This decision went into effect on January 1, 1804. McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 57, 86.

Orleans under US jurisdiction, and the Louisiana Ordinance of 1804, which governed the territory, outlawed the importation of foreign slaves. The ban included enslaved individuals from other states unless they accompanied their master who had permanently relocated to the territory. Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec estimates that 1,500 to 2,000 enslaved individuals arrived in New Orleans before the ban went into effect on October 1, 1804. This restriction was removed the following year when the Orleans Territory met the requirements for the second tier of territorial government.[29]

The lifting of the injunction against the importation of slaves from other states into New Orleans placed South Carolina in a prime position to supply the Crescent City and its surrounding plantations with enslaved labor. Having officially reopened the trade on January 1, 1804, South Carolina was now the only state that legally allowed the importation of slaves from Africa. The large swaths of newly-available land in lower Louisiana, ideal for growing sugar cane, fueled the demand for enslaved laborers in the territory. Traders and merchants in Charleston wasted no time in sending vessels to West and West Central Africa.[30] An estimated 75,000 enslaved Africans arrived in the South

[29] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 31, 34, 83-84; McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 98; Jed Shugerman, "The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade in 1803," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 22 (Summer 2002): 281; Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana: New Sources and New Estimates," *Louisiana History*, 46, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 189, 192, 196-202, 204. Le Glaunec's essay provides a detailed look at the shifting origins of slave importations into Louisiana between 1772 and 1808.

[30] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 57, 86, 98; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 73; Shugerman, "The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade," 281.

Carolina port between 1804 and 1808.[31] A portion of the slaves that disembarked in Charleston were subsequently shipped to New Orleans where they were sold.[32]

South Carolina's decision to overturn its prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1803 caused a renewed push by opponents of the trade to permanently abolish it when the twenty-year moratorium on federal regulation ceased. President Thomas Jefferson supported ending the trade and asked federal lawmakers to take action in December 1806. The following March, Congress outlawed the importation of foreign slaves into the United States. The legislation went into effect on December 31, 1807. The final months of legalized slave imports brought 12,000 enslaved Africans to Charleston. This extreme influx in such a short period glutted the market and prices dropped significantly. Some merchants attempted to hold onto the newly-imported slaves until demand returned with tragic results. Held on cramped ships or in warehouses, an estimated 700 people died.[33]

Transshipping imported Africans from Charleston to New Orleans provided an important outlet for South Carolina merchants to dispose of their surplus "merchandise." Once landing in Charleston, some captives were transferred to smaller ships and carried the 1,300 miles to the Louisiana port. Other slavers merely stopped over in Charleston

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[31] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 86, 94-95. Other scholars give the lower estimate of 39,075 imported slaves to Charleston during these four years, using a report made by Customs officials for a state senator in 1820. James McMillin, however, argues that this report was incomplete, and he has discovered additional arrivals using newspapers and other sources. The 75,000 figure was about the same number of slaves that had been imported into the state between 1701 and 1776. See Shugerman, "The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade," 264; Rothman, *Slave Country,* 85; McMillin, 32-34.

[32] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 34, 85; McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 95, 98; Shugerman, "The Louisiana Purchase and South Carolina's Reopening of the Slave Trade," 282; Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 205, 207-208. Le Glaunec counted at least 1,661 enslaved Africans arriving in New Orleans via Charleston between 1804 and 1808. However, he places the total number of imported slaves in Louisiana over these four years at 7,000 to 8,000 and says "most" were Africans re-exported from Charleston. Shugerman reports that Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's database on slave sales in Louisiana indicates that seventy-five percent of slaves disembarking in New Orleans between 1806 and 1810 were from Charleston.

[33] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 105-106, 111-113.

before sailing on to New Orleans with their entire "cargos." Merchant firms in the city such as Patton and Mossy purchased partial or whole shipments and then sold the enslaved men, women, and children at auction.[34] On February 6, 1807, for example, Patton and Mossy advertised the sale of a "140 Prime Congo Negroes...the first choice from a cargo of four hundred" in the *Louisiana Gazette*.[35] These slaves had recently arrived on the *Ethiopian* which had sailed from Charleston under the command of Captain Walsh.[36] Jean Maurau purchased at least one of the captives that disembarked from the *Ethiopian*. On July 10, 1807 he transferred ownership of a "*négresse brute*" named Rozette to his wife. Eugenie Maurau then sold the thirteen-year-old "Congo" girl "brought from Charleston by Captain Welchs" to fellow refugee Dame Marie Maragon, widow of Mr. Davezac de Casteras on August 20.[37] Two months previous to this sale, Jean Maurau sold Azor, a fourteen-year-old boy, also described as a newly arrived "Congo" to Joseph Aicard. Azor may have also come to New Orleans onboard the *Ethiopian*.[38]

As these two examples indicate, the Mauraus served essentially as retailers, buying recently imported Africans and reselling them in a few days, several months, or within a year or two. The thirteen African captives that the couple purchased and subsequently sold between 1806 and 1810 were mostly youths between the ages of

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[34] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* 91, 98, 100; Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 205.

[35] Quoted in Rothman, *Slave Country*, 86.

[36] McMillin, *The Final Victims,* Appendix B, 1516.

[37] *Vente d'esclave par Eugenie Maurau à Dame Marie Maragon Ve Davezac de Casteras*, August 20, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 83, NARC. Marie-Rose-Valentine Telarie de Maragon, the widow of Jean-Pierre-Valentin Davezac de Castera, lived in Aquin parish before relocating to New Orleans around 1803. Her husband died in the early years of the Haitian Revolution. See Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 216.

[38] [Slave Sale], June 20, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 16, page 159, NARC.

thirteen and fifteen, and three-fourths of the young people were girls.[39] It is unclear if the Mauraus based their decision to purchase boys and girls in their early adolescence on what was most available from the Charleston shipments or their own preferences. The final years of the legal US transatlantic trade overlapped with the last voyages of the British slave trade, as well the rejuvenation of the French trade. This led to considerable competition for slave buyers along the African coast, forcing captains to purchase less "desirable" captives, including children and to return with smaller cargoes than planned.[40] Because enslaved children cost less than adults, the Mauraus may have determined they could afford to purchase more young captives for resale. They may have chosen to purchase more girls than boys for the same reason.[41] It was also easier for the Mauraus to house, care for, and control young enslaved Africans rather than their older counterparts. For example, Jean Maurau likely purchased Rozette from Patton and Mossy soon after the firm advertised the *Ethiopian*'s arrival in February 1807. If so, the Mauraus continued to own her for five months before Eugenie sold Rozette in August.

The couple resold other captives more quickly, however. The *Louisiana Gazette* ran an advertisement for the arrival of Captain Flagg's brig *Caroline* from Charleston on October 31, 1806.[42] About two and a half weeks later, Jean Maurau sold a "*négresse brute*" named Félicité "from the shipment of the brig *The Caroline* of Charleston[,]

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[39] One of these thirteen slaves was a twenty-year-old woman, and sale records for two of the thirteen individuals did not give an indication of age. The records for most of these sales specifically mention Charleston.

[40] McMillin, *The Final Victims*, 106-107.

[41] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 87. Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec estimates that seventy percent of the captives arriving legally in New Orleans between 1804 and 1808 were males. See Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 205. In addition to the lower price of females, the Mauraus may have chosen to purchase more girls than boys to cater to urban slaveholders who sought domestics. This may have been similar to the market for female slaves in Cap Français before the Haitian Revolution, as discussed by Rogers and King.

[42] McMillin, *The Final Victims*, Appendix B, 1436.

Captain Flagg." Françoise Jourdan, a free woman of color, purchased the slave for 450 *piastres.*[43] Maurau sold another captive, described as a "*petit nègre brut,*" and to whom he gave the name André to Father Jean Koüne on October 2, 1807. Maurau had acquired André twenty days earlier from a schooner belonging to Sieurs Hart and Gauthier via Charleston.[44]

Only a few of the sale acts describe the slave by an "ethnic" label, but the ones that do reflect the circumstances of the trade at the time. Five of the thirteen enslaved individuals were referred to as "Congos," indicating that they embarked from a West Central Africa port. The number of captives brought to Charleston from this region made up the largest proportion of enslaved Africans imported during the final years of the trade. This represents a clear shift in provenance of imported slaves to South Carolina from previous periods. Although West Central Africans arrived in South Carolina in great numbers during the 1730s, few slave ships carrying captives from this region landed in Charleston during the remainder of the eighteenth century. Rather, "Greater Senegambia" made up the most significant export region for slaves disembarking in the British North American colonies, and particularly in South Carolina, prior to the nineteenth century. Senegambians, however, continued to arrive in large numbers in Charleston during the final years of the legal slave trade.[45] Due to the transshipments from South Carolina to Louisiana between 1804 and 1808, captives from both Senegambia and West Central

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[43] [Slave Sale], November 18, 1806, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 91, NARC. This record is one of two that does not give an indication of age.

[44][Slave Sale], October 2, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 149, NARC. Father Koüne was a Saint-Domingue refugee who served as an assistant to Father Antonio de Sedella, the priest at Saint Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. See Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans,* 101.

[45] McMillin, *The Final Victims*, 59-61; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities,* 90-91, 159-160. Hall defines "Great Senegambia" as the region between the Senegal River and the Sierre Leone River. Hall, 80. McMillin estimates that over 20,000 West Central Africans arrived in South Carolina between 1800 and 1810 due to "restricted supplies in other regions and the extension of feeder routes into the West-Central interior." McMillin, 60.

Africa made up the large majority of newly-arrived enslaved Africans in New Orleans. Among African slaves baptized in the city between 1800 and 1810, 41.4 percent were from West Central Africa and 21.6 percent were Senegambian.[46] On April 4, 1808, Jean Maurau sold a "*nègre brut*" named Jullien to Rene de la Rue. The sale document described the twelve-year-old boy as being "of the Senegal nation."[47]

Maurau purchased Jullien from Widow Causse in Charleston on July 30, 1807. It is possible that he traveled to Charleston in the summer of 1807 to buy Jullien. If so, he may have purchased an enslaved woman named Rozine on the same trip. Maurau sold Rozine to Jean Taurel in New Orleans on July 5, 1808 for $680.00. The sale record described Rozine as a "*négresse marchande*" of the "nation Congo," around twenty years old. The document indicated that Maurau had owned Rozine for about a year and that she had been imported from Charleston.[48] Maurau likely utilized Rozine as a peddler in the market or through the streets, earning an income from her retail of merchandise before selling her to Taurel.

Whether or not he actually traveled to Charleston to purchase slaves, Maurau had connections in the South Carolina port. On June 30, 1806, he purchased a laundress named Jeanne and her son, Michel, from Marianne Elizabeth Gaujean, Widow Laffiteau in Charleston.[49] The widow was a Saint-Domingue refugee from Port-au-Prince who relocated to Charleston with her children and extended family.[50] She brought Jeanne

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[46] Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 207-208.
[47] [Slave Sale], April 11, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 121, NARC.
[48] [Slave Sale], July 5, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 253, NARC.
[49] *Vente d'Esclave*, April 3, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 22, page 248; *Enregistrement*, April 3, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 22, page 249, NARC.
[50] *Dépôt par Mme Vve Laffiteau*, May 28, 1807, C6, No. 161 in Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-9; *Contrat de mariage entre le Sr Bjm Febvé et Dlle Laurence Gaujean*, March 30, 1808, C6, No. 149, Consulats Américains (1794-1826), 6SUPSDOM-9; *Contrat de Mariage entre le Sr. Louis Alphonse*

along, too. The sale record described Jeanne as a creole of Saint-Domingue who had been in Charleston since 1798. Her son, Michel, was born after arriving in Charleston since he was only seven or eight years old when Maurau purchased them from Widow Laffiteau.[51] It is unclear if Maurau and Laffiteau knew each other before the transaction took place, but the sale of Jeanne and Michel points to the active Saint-Domingue refugee networks that linked people across space through property. Both Laffiteau and Maurau benefitted from the economic currents that flowed from Charleston to New Orleans, carrying enslaved individuals to supply the Deep South's growing market in slaves.

After owning Jeanne and Michel for four years, Jean Maurau sold the enslaved mother and son for a sizeable profit. Maurau paid 380 *gourdes* for Jeanne and Michel together, but he sold them separately to the same buyer for 500 *piastres* and 400 *piastres*, respectively. On April 3, 1810, Raphael Antoine St. Geme Beauvais bought Jeanne from Maurau. That same day Maurau registered the transfer of Michel to Beauvais, but the actual transaction did not take place until July 18, 1810.[52] In the intervening four years, Jeanne may have served as a laundress and domestic in the Maurau household. The couple could have also rented her labor to neighbors who needed their clothing and linens washed.[53]

The Mauraus also traded with fellow refugees closer to home. On March 15, 1810, Jean Maurau sold "a young *mulatresse* named Lolotte creole of St. Domingue" to

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Decottes et Demoiselle Anne Constance Laffiteau, C6, No. 131, Consulats Américains, 6SUPSDOM-10, ANOM.

[51] *Enregistrement*, April 3, 1810.

[52] *Vente d'Esclave*, April 3, 1810; *Enregistrement*, April 3, 1810; *Vente d'Esclave*, July 18, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 23, page 417, NARC. *Gourdes* and *piastres* were the same value and were used interchangeably with dollars. See Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities*, 175 .

[53] An example of someone paying another person for laundry cleaned by his or her slave is Marie Charlotte Rolland. In her will, this free woman of color refugee explained that she owes Mr. Longchamp seven gourdes for the laundry his *négresse* did for her. *Testament de Marie Charlotte Rolland*, April 18, 1810.

Etienne Trepagnier for $900. Maurau had purchased Lolotte a few days before from Jacques Tanesse, a refugee who worked as a surveyor in New Orleans.[54] Tanesse did not bring Lolotte with him to Louisiana. He bought her from Nicolas Gravier on July 16, 1808 for $650. Gravier, in turn, had acquired Lolotte on June 20, 1807 from Pierre Godefroy. He paid $600 for the then-sixteen year old slave.[55] A former resident of Cap Français, Pierre Godefroy likely brought Lolotte with him when he left Saint-Domingue.[56] As she passed through the hands of multiple owners between 1807 and 1810, Lolotte's price continued to rise. The sale record does not indicate how much Maurau paid Tanesse for the enslaved woman, but the price of $900 paid by Trepagnier denotes that at least one, if not both, of these two vendors made a profit when they sold Lolotte. The various transactions involving Lolotte suggest the potentially lucrative outcome slave trading could provide to free Saint-Domingue refugees in New Orleans. For enslaved refugees, however, Lolotte's experience of being sold four times in three years serves to highlight the vulnerability these individuals faced in relocating to New Orleans.

Although the Mauraus seemed to prefer slaves from Africa or Saint-Domingue, at least one slave Jean Maurau purchased and resold during the territorial period likely came

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[54] *Vente d'esclave*, March 15, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 22, page 151;*Vente d'esclave par Sieur Pierre Godefroy à Sieur Nicolas Gravier*, June 20, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 16, page 126, NARC; [Contract between Barthelemy Lafon and Jacques Tanesse], September 5, 1805, MSS 316 Barthelemy Lafon Contract Book, 1804-1821, HNOC; Roulhac Toledano and Mary Louise Christovich, *New Orleans Architecture Vol. 4: Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2003), 17.

[55] *Vente d'esclave par Sieur Nicolas Gravier à Sieur Jacques Tanesse*, July 16, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 275, NARC; *Vente d'esclave par Sieur Pierre Godefroy à Sieur Nicolas Gravier*, June 20, 1807.

[56] Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 9:165; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:204. Pierre Godefroy, native of Le Cap, had a brother named Pierre Marie Therese Godefroy, who had also relocated to New Orleans. These men are not to be confused with Pierre François Simon Godefroy, a French native who worked as lawyer and notary in New Orleans at the same time.

through Anglo-American channels.[57] On April 23, 1807 Maurau bought an enslaved woman at Joseph Faurie's public auction for $365. The sale act described the slave as a "*négresse* named Paty, laundress and cook, about nineteen years old belonging to Mr. Hukman." Hukman's proxy, Josiah Crocker, signed the notary document that recorded the sale.[58] Paty's exact origin is unclear, but judging by her name, as well as that of Hukman and Josiah Crocker, she may have been brought to New Orleans from another part of the United States.[59]

Maurau did not own Paty for very long. On May 11, he sold her to C. B. Dufau through Faurie's auction. At the sale, Maurau advertised Paty as "1) the age of twenty-two years or thereabouts 2) a good subject and suitable for housework 3) laundress 4) good with a pickaxe
5) knowing how to do a little bit of everything and being in this country for some time 6) understanding a little of the French language and a willingness to go anywhere, etc."[60] These qualities appealed to Dufau, who purchased Paty for the same price Maurau had paid Hukman. Dufau agreed to pay the $365 "at four months of credit in good endorsed notes."[61]

Unlike the other transactions involving slaves that Maurau made, the sale of Paty to Dufau did not go so smoothly. When Dufau did not deliver the endorsed notes in a timely manner Maurau filed a petition to the New Orleans City Court on May 15.

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[57] Although African captives made up the largest proportion of slaves imported to Louisiana between 1804 and1808, Le Glaunec indicates that a substantial number also came from states in the Upper South and Carolina Lowcountry. Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 208.

[58] *Vente Réele*, April 23, 1807, Acts of S. de Quinones, page 278, NARC.

[59] Another document described Paty as, among other things, "being in this country for some time" and "understanding a little of the French language." She could have been African-born and owned by English-speakers in New Orleans rather than North American-born. Either way, Paty was clearly not a Louisiana creole. See *Daufau v. Maurau*, case no. 579, May 16, 1807, New Orleans City Court Records, NOPL.

[60] *Daufau v. Maurau*, case no. 579.

[61] *Maureau v. Dufau*, case no. 577, May 11, 1807, New Orleans City Court Records, NOPL.

Maurau's lawyer requested that the judge issue a summons that would require Dufau to "appear before this honorable court to be decreed to pay unto your petitioner the aforesaid sum of $365 with cash and charges of this suit."[62] In response, Dufau enlisted a lawyer to file a petition on his behalf. The countersuit explained that Dufau refused to pay because he was a victim of false advertising. He claimed that in addition to the list of skills and other attributes Maurau used to describe Paty at the auction, the seller had also guaranteed that she was free from the maladies prescribed by law. Thus, believing Paty to be "free of all redhibitory vices" Dufau purchased her. Yet, soon after Dufau took possession of Paty she fell very ill. He returned her to Faurie's auction so that Maurau could take her back and the sale be annulled.[63]

According to Louisiana's law of redhibition, vendors had to reveal any defects of the property to be sold or guarantee that the property was free of flaws that would prevent the buyer from making the purchase. This "warranty of quality" applied to slave sales well as other types of property transactions. The law enumerated specific "vices or maladies" that rendered an enslaved person "defective," including diseases such as epilepsy and behaviors like running away.[64] The sale act had to state the vendor's

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[62] *Maureau v. Dufau*, case no. 577.

[63] *Daufau v. Maurau*, case no. 579.

[64] Judith Schafer, " 'Guaranteed Against the Vices and Maladies Prescribed by Law': Consumer Protection, the Law of Slave Sales, and the Supreme Court in Antebellum Louisiana," *American Journal of Legal History* 31 (1987), 309-311; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 131; Ariela Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), n. 15, 170; *Digest of the Civil Laws now in Force in the Territory of Orleans*, 1808, accessed May 20, 2013, http://www1.law.lsu.edu/clo/digest-online. Judith Schafer explains that the laws concerning sales in the Louisiana *Civil Code* borrowed from both French and Roman law. French civil law regulated the obligations of the seller by giving the buyer the ability to sue the vendor for selling a "defective product." To this idea, the Louisiana *Civil Code* added the Roman legal "concept of *redhibitia*, meaning the process of cancellation of a slave sale because of hidden defects," which included "debilitating illness or physical impairment" or recurrent absconding. In terms of disease, the "redhibitory defects" for slaves were leprosy, madness, and epilepsy (Art. 80). The "redhibitory vices and defects inherent in the disposition of slaves" were guilty of a capital offense, the habit of robbery, or the habit of running away (Art. 79). The Louisiana

guarantee. If the slave did have a known disease or vice, the (honest) seller would list these in the sale record or include "a clause voiding the standard form of warranty."[65] If a buyer purchased a slave whom the seller had guaranteed against the vices and maladies prescribed by law and this turned out to be untrue, the buyer could return the slave and cancel the sale. If the seller refused to accept the slave, the buyer could sue the vendor for rescission of the sale.[66]

Dufau's petition further explained that his attempt to return Paty to Maurau was rebuffed. Maurau "refused to take her back, basing it on a frivolous pretext." Dufau, however, felt he had the law on his side. He claimed that he could prove that Paty suffered from a prolapsed uterus and that this illness fell under the redhibitory laws that protected buyers from unscrupulous sellers attempting to pass off a sick slave for a healthy one. Dufau requested that Maurau be brought to court to force him to take back Patty and render the sale null and void.[67]

Unfortunately, the outcome of Dufau's suit against Maurau is unknown. The extant petitions reveal, however, the pitfalls of dealing in human property confronted by buyers and sellers, alike. Although Maurau may have been unaware of Paty's illness, his quick turnaround in selling her to Dufau suggests otherwise. Legal historian Judith Schafer warns that while "honest mistakes must have been made, the large number of redhibition-illness cases [in the Louisiana Supreme Court] indicates that owners, slave dealers, and auctioneers knowingly sold unwell slaves in at least some instances to offset

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Civil Code (1825) defined habitual running away was either twice absconding for a few days or once for a month. Quoted in Schafer, 310.

[65] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 131. The phrase "guaranteed against the vices and maladies prescribed by law" was the standard form of warranty included in slave acts. The exact wording of the warranty differed slightly from act to act.

[66] Schafer, "Guaranteed Against the Vices," 311.

[67] *Daufau v. Maurau*, case no. 579.

the financial loss of a slave with a serious or terminal illness."[68] Likely deceived by Hukman, Maurau attempted to pass Paty off to another unsuspecting buyer as quickly as possible. Dufau believed he bought a healthy enslaved woman, who had some knowledge of Francophone Louisiana and was adept in the domestic arts. Not only did Paty's illness reduce her value as a source of household labor, her specific condition rendered her "defective" as a source of reproductive labor. It also called into question the other attributes Maurau provided at the time of sale. Walter Johnson argues that slave traders' sales pitches exploited the fantasies that buyers brought with them to the market about the ideal slave to fit their imagined needs. A list of skills or qualifications, like that used to describe Paty at the auction, provided evidence "through which buyers could view a certain future."[69]

Rather than the "certain future" awaiting Dufau with his purchase of a skilled housekeeper of child-bearing age, Paty's "malady" hints at painful past. If indeed she suffered from uterine prolapse, at her young age it was likely the result of a difficult pregnancy or delivery. Yet, none of the records mention a child. Sick and alone, Paty faced an unknown future. While Maurau and Dufau sought legal recourse against the other for financial losses sustained in the slave market, it was ultimately Paty who had the most to lose.

As the disagreement between Jean Maurau and C. B. Dufau shows, slave trading was a risky and costly business. Perhaps in recognition of these risks, the Mauraus became much less active in the market after 1810. The flurry of purchases and quick resales made by the couple over the previous four years subsided. Between the time of

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[68] Schafer, "Guaranteed Against the Vices," 311.
[69] Johnson, *Soul by Soul,* 125.

their arrival in New Orleans in 1804 and the close of the foreign slave trade in 1808, Jean and Eugenie proved their resourcefulness by taking advantage of a narrow window of opportunity. Slave trading enabled them to build up capital and credit while making social and business connections in their new place of residence.

The Mauraus' involvement in slave trading waned, but they continued to own slaves. Eugenie's purchase of Beatrix from fellow refugee Pierre Collette on September 29, 1810 signaled a change in the role human property played in their economic strategy. After this point, the Maurau's utilization of slaves focused on their labor, as domestics in the household and peddlers in Jean Maurau's retail business. Over the next nineteen years, the couple bought four enslaved women. Jean Maurau owned all but one these women at the time of his death in 1829, and eventually all four them gained their freedom.[70]

In total, Jean and Eugenie Maurau owned nine slaves between 1810 and 1829. Three of these slaves were children born to two of the four women purchased by the Mauraus. In addition, the couple owned a woman named Lucia who had a son on June 14, 1813. The following day, the child was baptized with the name Antonio. The priest recorded that "the godparents are the already referred to master Juan Moreau and Maria Antonia Moreau also [Antonio's] mistress, whom I advised of the spiritual

[70] Eugenie Maurau died in 1819. Two years later, Jean sold Beatrix to Antoine Villard, a free man of color, under the express condition that he free Beatrix immediately. *M. Jean Maureau vente d'esclave avec condition d'affranchisement à Ante. Villard h.d.c.l,* April 4, 1821, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 19, page 120, NARC.

guardianship."[71] It is unclear when the Mauraus acquired Lucia or what happened to her and her son. No other record involving Lucia or Antonio was located.[72]

Slave importations to New Orleans did not cease after the prohibition of the international slave trade went into effect in 1808. Over the four years between the end of the trade and Louisiana statehood in 1812, at least 4,000 enslaved people were imported to the Territory through legal channels. However, the provenance of these imported slaves and the routes they traveled to the Crescent City shifted. Small vessels carrying slaves from the mid-Atlantic states left from port cities such as Baltimore, Maryland and Norfolk, Virginia bound for New Orleans. Other slaves were carried down the Mississippi River or on overland routes originating in urban centers like Richmond, Virginia in the Upper South. This interstate slave trade expanded rapidly after 1815, following the end of the War of 1812. In addition to these lawful sources, smuggling brought African and Caribbean captives through the bayous below New Orleans to be sold in the city's slave market.[73]

"Slaves" and Saint-Dominguans

The estimated 4,000 slaves that arrived in Louisiana between 1808 and 1812 included those who were landed in South Carolina before the deadline as well as those sold through the domestic market. This figure does not include the 3,226 "slaves" who

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[71] *Antonio Mulato esclavo de Juan Moreau*, June 15, 1813, no. 756, page 109, *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 13, Part 2: 1813-1814, AANO.

[72] Neither Lucia nor Antonio was included in Jean Maurau's first will, recorded in 1819, or in subsequent testaments. I also could not find a sale record indicating that the Mauraus sold Lucia and Antonio or an emancipation record that they were freed. They could have been sold under private seal, in which case the sale would not have been recorded by a notary. It is also possible that Lucia and Antonio died.

[73] Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," 208-209; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 89-94, 193-195, 199-200.

arrived in New Orleans from Cuba between May 1809 and January 1810. As discussed in Chapter Three, official tallies of the Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba designated about one-third of the group as "white people," one-third as "free colored and black people," and the remaining third as "slaves."[74] The imprecise process of categorization that took place at landing combined assumptions of status made by ship captains, often based on visual cues, with claims of ownership by fellow refugees. Some of those émigrés counted as slaves were Africans and creoles purchased in Cuba by free Saint-Dominguans. However, a large number of refugees referred to as slaves were individuals who had been freed in Saint-Domingue by the 1794 general emancipation decree but were claimed as property by other refugees after relocating to Cuba. The 3,226 total also included men and women who "had been free in Saint-Domingue and had maintained their freedom in Cuba but were now at risk of being categorized as slaves."[75] Although some of these refugees identified as slaves were able to prove their freedom once in New Orleans, the (re)classification of status remained for most. The arrival of Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba, then, almost doubled the number of slaves imported to Louisiana in the last four years of the Territorial period.

New Orleans officials did not question the slave status of one-third of the arriving Saint-Domingue refugees. Given the recent prohibition of foreign slave importations, however, the introduction of such a large number of slaves from Cuba was highly problematic. An influx of Saint-Dominguan slaves not only challenged the federal ban, it

[74] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:381.
[75] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers,* 66, 68.

once again raised the specter of insurrection.[76] The question of whether slaveholding refugees should be permitted to enter New Orleans with their slaves divided the city's white population. A mere four years before, Francophone Louisianans and Anglo-Americans agreed that slaves from the former French colony should be barred from admittance to the Territory. This changed with the arrival of thousands of Saint-Domingue refugees expelled from Cuba. French and creole residents viewed the influx of French-speaking white refugees as critical to bolster their numbers and keep the balance of power in their favor. They recognized that the best way to guarantee white Saint-Dominguans' settlement in Louisiana was admittance of their slaves. White Americans, on the other hand, protested the entrance of the refugees. They feared the introduction of enslaved and free black Saint-Dominguans and were suspicious of the white refugees. They, too, recognized the impact a large number of French-speaking settlers could have on American control in the city. Unable to make a legal argument against the admittance of white refugees, Anglo-Americans looked to the federal ban on foreign slaves and the 1806 Territorial ordinance that barred free men of color from relocating to Louisiana to prevent the immigration of Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba.[77]

For Territorial Governor William C. C. Claiborne, the arrival of ships from Cuba carrying white, free black, and enslaved Saint-Dominguans placed him in a difficult position. Claiborne had to navigate the competing opinions among a divided populace, uphold a federal law for which enforcement methods remained undefined, and provide the white refugees with "that hospitality and indulgence which humanity and courtesy

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[76] White, *Encountering Revolution,* 183, 188; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 66; Paul Lachance, "The Politics of Fear: French Louisianans and the Slave Trade, 1786-1809," *Plantation Society* 1, no. 2 (June 1979): 194.

[77] Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 183-184, 186-188, 190-193; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 252, 254; White, *Encountering Revolution,* 185, 188, 190, 196-197.

require, and to which their peculiar and distressed Situation so strongly recommend them."[78] The first ships from Cuba neared La Balize, the fort at the mouth of the Mississippi River in May 1809. Claiborne instructed the commanding officer to allow the ships "from St. Yago, with Passengers, and some Negro's [sic] on board, to pass the Fort" but to "inform the Captain that the Laws do not admit the Slaves to be landed, and that if it should be done, his vessel will be forfeited, and other penalties will be incurred."[79] Spacing out their arrival in New Orleans from downriver so as not to overburden the city's resources, Claiborne allowed the "free passengers" to disembark. Refugees of African descent deemed "slaves" had to remain onboard.[80]

Slaveholders forced to leave their slaves on the ship objected to this solution. In late May a group of "passengers" met with Claiborne to plead their case. The refugees explained that they planned to settle permanently on land outside of the city where they could grow crops. To do this, they needed labor and thus hoped Congress would allow them permission to settle with their slaves. The refugees "lamented the obstacle which the Laws opposed to the landing of the few faithful domesticks [sic] who had accompanied them in their misfortunes, and whose services were now so essential to their support."[81] White French-speaking residents backed the refugee slaveholders, submitting their own petition to Claiborne requesting that he allow the émigrés to have their slaves. Although he sympathized with "these unfortunate People," Claiborne explained in a letter

[78] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:365; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 188, 197-198.
[79] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:358. For other examples of Claiborne's instructions to officers at the fort see pages 351, 355, 358-359, 366-367, 378.
[80] White, *Encountering Revolution*, 191; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 187; Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:363, 365, 367, 372.
[81] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:363-364.

to the Secretary of State that "my powers do not permit me to interfere in their favour, otherwise than to lay their case before the President." [82]

In addition to his limitations of office, Claiborne based his wait-and-see approach on the idea that the number of slaves arriving from Cuba would "not exceed three hundred."[83] This strategy became untenable, though, as ships steadily continued to bring Saint-Dominguans up the Mississippi. On June 19 the Governor changed his policy, allowing the refugees still held on ships to disembark in New Orleans. Mayor James Mather then discharged these "slaves" to the people who claimed them as such. Slaveholders regained their human property under the condition that they posted a bond and agreed to relinquish their slaves, if ordered to do so. On June 28 Congress validated Claiborne's decision to permit the entrance of slaves by approving an act that voided the penalties charged for violation of the slave importation ban.[84]

Claiborne admitted that his decision was based, in part, on political expediency. Allowing free refugees to land with their slaves served as a way to gain support for his administration from white French Louisianans and Saint-Dominguans.[85] He also defended his decision to waive the foreign slave ban for the refugees on economic grounds, arguing that refugees' access to their slaves relieved the city of supporting an influx of "poor people from Cuba."[86] Furthermore, Claiborne did not believe there were any real alternatives to landing the slaves. Imprisoning them or shipping them somewhere

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[82] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:354; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 67; White, *Encountering Revolution,* 190-191; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 92.

[83] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:372; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 190.

[84] White, *Encountering Revolution*, 191; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 67; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 188-189; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 92.

[85] White, *Encountering Revolution*, 196-197; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 257.

[86] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:372, 391; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 197; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 189.

else proved logistically and financially impractical.[87] The Governor agreed with opponents that "so great a number of foreigners" in Louisiana was not ideal. He "would much rather, that the Space in this society, which these emigrants will fill, had been preserved for native Citizens of the United States." However, Claiborne felt he could not deny them "Asylum" and hoped that they would leave New Orleans with their slaves and settle throughout the Territory.[88]

Much to Claiborne's chagrin, a mass dispersal of refugees from New Orleans did not occur. Throughout the summer ships continued to arrive from Santiago de Cuba, Baracoa, and Havana. The Governor wrote to Mayor James Mather in early August for a report on the state of the refugees in the city. Claiborne asked if the refugees "seem desirous to retire into the interior of the Territory?—Or do they appear to wish to fix themselves permanently in this City?"[89] Mather replied that the circumstances under which refugee slaveholders were permitted their slaves kept them in New Orleans and that "the longer they will be compelled to stay in Town, the less they will feel disposed to settle in the more distant parts of this Territory." The official authorization by Congress only further encouraged refugee masters to remain in New Orleans where they had begun "to hire their negroes and procure for themselves the necessaries [sic] of Life." [90] In March 1810, the Territorial legislature voted to return the securities that refugees put up for their slaves and to permit them to sell their bondsmen and women "on the same terms as legally imported slaves."[91] The removal of this final restriction on their ownership

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[87] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:390; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 194; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 189.

[88] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:390; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 192-193; Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 190-191.

[89] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4: 403.

[90] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:406; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 260.

[91] Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 260-261.

allowed slaveholding refugees to fully capitalize on their human property, making it even easier to permanently settle in New Orleans. As Paul Lachance observes, Saint-Dominguan sellers could easily afford a lot in one of the new faubourgs with the money earned from the sale of an enslaved adult.[92] Of course, selling a person claimed as property but who had lived as free made it that more difficult for the person sold to regain his or her free status.[93]

Around this time Jean and Eugenie Maurau began purchasing slaves to labor in their household. For their domestics, the Mauraus preferred slaves with Saint-Domingue connections. Eugenie first purchased Beatrix from Collette in 1810. She next bought Justine, a twenty-year-old creole, and Arsene, "nation Ibo about fourteen years" from Louis Bouder on April 10, 1811. Bouder was a free black refugee who had likely arrived in New Orleans from Santiago de Cuba in the summer of 1809. The sale record explained that he had purchased both slaves in the Cuban port, acquiring Justine from "M. Dutillet" on September 19, 1803 and Arsene from Mr. Rey on November 12, 1808.[94]

As a free man of color émigré, Louis Bouder was not allowed to settle permanently in Louisiana. The law required him to present himself to the mayor and post a bond of security that guaranteed he would leave the territory in two weeks. Although Governor Claiborne allowed all "free passengers" to disembark under his initial plan, he fully expected the exclusionary measures against free men of color passed by the Territorial Legislature in 1806 and again in 1807 to be upheld.[95] In mid-July 1809, James

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[92] Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 261.

[93] Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 70.

[94] *Vente d'esclave par Ls. Bouder à Eugenie Moreau*, April 10, 1811, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 25, page 159, NARC.

[95] Rowland, *Official Letter Books,* 4:365; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 65; Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 262n65. The 1806 law barred the settlement of free men of color over the age of fifteen from Saint-Domingue and other French Caribbean colonies. In 1807, this measure was broadened to include any

Mather assured the Governor that he was applying the law as best he could (although he admitted in a later report that he had only been able to procure bonds from sixty-four free men of color). He informed Claiborne, however, that he knew of no complaints against any of the incoming free people of color and pointed out that "these very men possess property, and have useful trades to live upon."[96] In the Mayor's view, at least, men like Louis Bouder, who could claim ownership of two slaves, did not pose a threat to New Orleans.

Claiborne remained unconvinced. In an effort to "discourage free people of Colour of every description from emigrating to the Territory of Orleans," he informed the American Consul in Santiago de Cuba of the exclusion law in August. Although "the males above the age of fifteen" had been "ordered to depart," Claiborne admitted that "the Women and Children have been received."[97] Gender-based assumptions about who was culpable in the Haitian Revolution and who presented a potential threat to the safety of white residents in New Orleans exempted women and children from the exclusion law. In the official count, their numbers amounted to 2,674 free women and children of color—eighty-six percent of the 3,103 free black refugees that arrived in New Orleans from Cuba.[98]

While exact figures are not known, evidence from wills, sales acts, and court records suggests that a sizeable proportion of the 1,297 refugee women of African descent regarded as free in the Mayor's report claimed ownership of a number of the

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free man of color, no matter whence he came. The act excluded free women and children of African descent because they were not considered dangerous.

[96] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:388, 407.

[97] Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4:402.

[98] Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration," 247.

3,226 people classified as slaves.[99] One of these women was Rosalie Chesneau. When she recorded her first will in New Orleans on January 25, 1810, Chesneau listed five enslaved women as her "properties in this territory": Marie Zilia, *négresse*, twenty years old; Marie Magdeleine, *négresse*, about twenty-two years old; Marie Joseph, *négresse*, about twenty-four years old; Marie Therese Octavie, *négresse*, about eighteen years old; and Beatrix, about ten years old.[100] Marie Joseph, Marie Therese Octavie, and Marie Magdeleine were all sisters and creoles from Saint-Domingue. They may have been born on Chesneau's plantation in Guinaudée or more likely were the daughters of a domestic in her house on *la Grande Rue* in Jean Rabel. Beatrix was also a creole of Saint-Domingue, and it is probable that Marie Zilia was born there, too. [101] Given their ages in 1810, these women would have all been young girls or teens at the end of the Revolution. This may explain, in part, how they came to relocate with Chesneau first to Baracoa and then to New Orleans.

It is not clear if these five young women were classified as slaves or servants in Baracoa. If they were listed as *criadas* rather than slaves on the manifest for the ship that carried them to New Orleans, Chesneau clearly viewed them as property and described them as such in her will. She also emancipated all five of these women in her 1810 testament and bequeathed her plantation in Guinaudée to their "born and unborn children."[102] The directives in this testament did not go into effect because Chesneau

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[99] For examples of free women of color refugees who brought slaves with them to New Orleans see Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 146-149.

[100] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau fcl*, January 25, 1810.

[101] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau f. de c. & l.*, August 10, 1830 in Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 3, Act 274, NARC ; *Vente d'emplacement, magasin, et batiments par le Sr. Sapineau au Sr. Joseph Bouyer*, January 19, 1790, Consulats américaines, 6SUPSDOM-7, ANOM.

[102] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau fcl*, January 25, 1810. The children she referred to were Toussine, the daughter of Marie Zilia who was born in Baracoa, and Marcos Andres, the son of Marie Joseph, who

continued to live until 1833 (and recorded multiple wills during this time). Her treatment of these five enslaved women over the next twenty years, however, suggests that they lived as the more ambiguous term *criada* even as they were rendered *esclavas* in Louisiana.

In addition to the five young women she enumerated in her testament, Chesneau had possession of several more slaves in 1810. The census taken that year listed Chesneau's household on Histoire Street as containing four free people of color and seven slaves.[103] At least one of these slaves was certainly a young girl named Toussine, the daughter of Marie Zilia. On April 10, 1832 Chesneau sold Toussine to her mother, whom she had freed in 1819. The sale record described Toussine as "about 26 years daughter of the buyer; creole of the island of Cuba and belonging to the seller by being born in her house when Marie Zilia was her slave."[104] Another one of the seven slaves was probably Marcos Andres, the son of Marie Joseph. The child was born in New Orleans on July 24, 1810.[105] Besides these two children, one of the slaves counted in the 1810 Census may have been one of the three enslaved females Marie Genevieve Zelime Fortunat "left in the hands of Mlle. Rosalie Chesneau" as collateral for the debt she owed Chesneau in Baracoa.[106] Rosalie held at least one of these women until April 5, 1813

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was born in New Orleans in July 1810. Thus, Marie Joseph was pregnant when Chesneau recorded her will in January. Toussine and Marcos Andres will be discussed further below.

[103] Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810, reproduced on roll 10, United States National Archives Microcopy M252, accessed May 25, 2013, http://www.usgwarchives.net/la /Orleans/census/1810/0275.gif. The identity of the three other free people of color in the household is not clear. One of the residents was very likely Chesneau's goddaughter, Zoe Plastrier, whom Chesneau names as a beneficiary in her 1810 will.

[104] *Vente d'esclave par Rosalie Chesneau à Marie Zilia neg.sse lib.*, April 10, 1832; Index to Slave Emancipation Petitions, 1814-1843, Louisiana Parish Court Records, NOPL, accessed May 25, 2013, http://nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/vcp/emancip.htm.

[105] *Marcos Andres mulato libre Chesneau*, February 6, 1811, page 8, no. 47, *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 12, Part1: 1811-1811, AANO.

[106] *Rosalie Chaineau Enregt de pièce*, May 26, 1821.

when she exchanged the twenty-one year old *négresse*, Marine, for a thirteen year old boy named Louis owned by François Ducoin.[107]

Arriving from Cuba with as many as nine slaves placed Rosalie Chesneau in an advantageous position to rebuild in New Orleans. She likely set the women to work, earning money through renting their labor or income from marketing. Marie Joseph, for example, was a laundress and Octavie sold cakes along the streets.[108] Chesneau may have sold two of the slaves given to her by Fortunat, which would have provided her with income she could use to rent her residence from Pierre Matignan on Histoire Street. Eventually Chesneau began to work as a midwife, a set of skills she brought with her from Saint-Domingue.[109] This occupation certainly required the assistance of her female slaves. In addition to the income and labor Chesneau gained from arriving with slaves, the very act of claiming property rights over these women allowed Chesneau to present herself as a free woman in New Orleans.[110]

Within the first two years of her arrival Rosalie Chesneau purchased two more female slaves. She bought a woman named Sanite and her daughter, Pamela from Diego

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[107] [Exchange of Slaves], April 5, 1813, Acts of J. Lynd, Volume 8, page 153, NARC. It is unclear what happened with the other two slaves Fortunat gave to Chesneau nor is it clear how long Chesneau owned Louis.

[108] *Inventaire des biens dependant de la Succession de feu Rosalie Chesneau*, September 9, 1833.

[109] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau fcl*, January 25, 1810. Chesneau is listed as a midwife in the following city directories: 1822, 1823, 1827, 1832, and 1834. She is not included in the 1811 city directory and there are no directories between 1811 and 1822. See Paxton's City Directory, 1822; Paxton's City Directory, 1823; Paxton's City Directory, 1827; Percy and Company's New Orleans City Directory, 1832; Michel's New Orleans Annual and Commercial Register, 1834, microfilm, HNOC, hereafter, [date] City Directory.

[110] Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard contend that "[h]owever confusing the initial circumstances, if one refugee succeeded in exercising the powers attaching to the right of ownership over another, that action gave apparent solidity to the claim of ownership itself." I would argue that exercising the powers of ownership also solidified the claims to free status by some refugees of African descent. See Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 67.

Morphy on November 18, 1812.[111] This sale was not a selection made among the available slaves in the New Orleans market, but rather a deliberate purchase that Chesneau had intended to make for a long time, perhaps even before her relocation to the Crescent City. With the acquisition of Sanite and Pamela, Chesneau sought to maintain a relationship that originated in Saint-Domingue and crossed status lines.

The purchase of Sanite and Pamela utilized a refugee network that involved a white widow in Charleston, a Spanish government agent in New Orleans, and a free woman of color slave owner. Attached to the sale act was a letter from *Veuve* Prieur in Charleston, South Carolina to Diego Morphy in New Orleans. In the missive, dated August 17, 1812, the Widow asked that Morphy act as her agent for the sale. She explained that "*Mademoiselle* Rosalie Chesneau, *f. de C.*, who resides in your city" was the godmother of her slave Sanite. Chesneau planned to buy Sanite with her daughter Pamela and had recently written to Prieur asking if she intended to sell the two slaves. Prieur "willingly agreed" for the sum of $600. The Widow did not like to impose her business on Morphy, "but not knowing anyone in your city that I can put my best interests," she asked him to facilitate the sale by collecting the money and sending it to her by "the safest means" possible.[112]

Both Diego Morphy and the Widow Prieur were Saint-Domingue refugees who had met in Charleston. Born in Spain, Morphy lived in Cap Français before the Haitian Revolution. During the war he and his family fled to the United States, where he served as the Spanish vice-consul in Charleston between 1799 and 1809. In 1810, the Morphy family moved to New Orleans, following Diego's appointment as the Spanish consul

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[111] *Vente d'esclave... V.e Prieur à Rosalie Chesneau*, November 18, 1812, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 7, Act 621, NARC.

[112] *Vente d'esclave... V.e Prieur à Rosalie Chesneau*, November 18, 1812.

there.[113] It is unclear where in the colony the Widow Prieur lived, but she possibly resided in Jean Rabel, given Chesneau's spiritual sponsorship of Sanite.[114] By 1805 the Widow was in Charleston. Her daughter, Laura, married another refugee in the city on December 17 of that year.[115] Charleston newspapers indicate that Diego Morphy was involved in soliciting charitable funds for newly-arrived refugees between 1803 and 1806.[116] It is possible that the Morphys helped Prieur and her children settle in Charleston. The Widow evoked a close association between the two families when she ended her letter with assurances that she and her children held good memories of "you and Mrs. Morphy, and your kind family."[117]

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[113] Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:317; Stanley Faye, "Consuls of Spain in New Orleans, 1804-1821," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1938), 679-680. Diego Morphy, Sr. married Mary Creagh in Cap Français in 1789. They had three children together, including Diego Morphy, Jr. Creagh died in Charleston in 1797, and Morphy married a fellow Saint-Domingue refugee, Louise Peyre. The couple then moved to New Orleans and had several children together. Diego Morphy, Sr. died in New Orleans in August 1813. His son, Diego, Jr. took over as vice-consul for Spain and continued in this position until 1817. See Faye, 680-682; *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Charleston, SC, September 22, 1797.

[114] In the letter, Prieur gave Sanite's age as thirty-eight years old. It is possible that Sanite was baptized in Jean Rabel and then sold to Prieur, who may have lived in another part of the island. A travel memoir by the Baron de Montlezun described a visit in Charleston on April 11, 1817, in which the author, whose father was a commander in Cap Français, met with "madame Prieur." The Baron de Montlezun believed the elderly Prieur was a friend of his father's, and this turned out to be true. He claimed Madame Prieur had been a rich land owner in Dondon (in the northwest part of the island, near the border with Santo Domingo). She had two daughters, one of whom married "M. de Caen." The Baron de Montlezun reminisced with Prieur and her "three negresses, almost as old as their mistress." The aged Widow Prieur died not too long after this visit. There is a grave marker in St. Mary of the Annunciation Church's cemetery for Widow Prieur who died on August 31, 1818. See Baron de Montlezun, *Voyage Fait Dans Les Années 1816 et 1817, de New-Yorck A La Nouvelle-Orléans, et de L'Orénoque au Mississippi; Par Les Petites et Les Grandes-Antilles, Contenant de details absolument nouveaux sur ces contrées; des portraits de personnages influent dans les Etats-Unis, et des anecdotes sur les réfugiés qui sont établis; Par L'Auteur des Souvenirs des Antilles*, (Paris: Librarie de Gide Fils, 1818), 197-199; Maggee Smith, *Transcription of gravestones for Saint Domingue Natives at St. Mary of the Annunciation's Churchyard Cemetery*, Charleston, SC, accessed March 18, 2011, http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com /~saintdomingue/stmarysnames.html.

[115] A. S. Salley, Jr., ed. and comp., *Marriage Notices in Charleston Courier, 1803-1807*, (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1919), 28. Laura Prieur, "the youngest daughter of the late Mr. Prieur, a respectable inhabitant of said Island" married "Mr. James Decemp, late inhabitant of St. Domingo."

[116] See, for example, *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, December 28, 1803; *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, February 16, 1805; *Charleston Courier*, February 21, 1805; *Charleston Courier*, April 10, 1806.

[117] *Vente d'esclave... V.e Prieur à Rosalie Chesneau,* November 18, 1812. Prieur also wrote, "I still take the liberty of have the pleasure to write to you to ask you to accord me again your good service." This suggests that Morphy had helped her before.

That she went to such lengths to reunite with her goddaughter indicates the importance that this relationship held for Chesneau. Because these women's statuses fell on different sides of free and slave, the logic of slavery made buying Sanite a practical way to maintain their connection. This bond did not necessarily erase the power dynamic inherent in the mistress/slave relationship. It is quite likely that Chesneau utilized Sanite and Pamela's labor and earned income while she owned them. For Sanite, this period lasted only five years. On January 20, 1817, Chesneau emancipated her goddaughter.[118] Sanite remained in New Orleans where she could stay close to Pamela. Listed in the 1830 Census as "Sanite Prieur," she had by this time moved into the ranks of slave owner, too.[119] Chesneau, however, continued to own Pamela for eighteen years. Perhaps fulfilling a promise made to Sanite long before, Chesneau manumitted the young woman on January 4, 1830.[120]

When the Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba began to arrive in New Orleans in May 1809 an editorial published in the *Courrier de la Louisiane* voiced support for the slave owning émigrés to be allowed to land with their slaves. The author explained,

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[118] *Acte de liberté par Rosalie Chesneau f.d.c.l. à la negresse Sanite*, January 20, 1817, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 12, Act 24, NARC.

[119] Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves*, 15. The Census listed one slave in the household headed by Sanite Prieur.

[120] *Affranchisement par Rosalie Chesneau, f. de c.l. de la mulatresse Pamela*, January 4, 1830, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 3, Act 5, NARC. It is likely that the manumission laws at the time affected the timing of Chesneau's decision to emancipate Pamela. Since 1807 special permission had to be gained to emancipate a slave under thirty years old. Pamela's age in the 1812 sale act was listed as about seven years old. The age restrictions for emancipations were removed in a law passed in 1827. In two of the three testaments Chesneau recorded after freeing Pamela, she named Pamela as a beneficiary. In her August 10, 1830 will, she left Pamela a slave named Myrthé and two pieces of silverware. In the next will, recorded on May 13, 1832, she bequeathed Myrthé to Pamela again and requested that Pamela care for a young orphan whom Chesneau had taken in. Chesneau's final will, recorded on June 29, 1833, did not mention Pamela. It is possible that Pamela had passed away between the creation of the two documents. She may have died in the cholera epidemic that struck New Orleans between October 27 and November 6, 1832. *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau f. de c. & l.*, August 10, 1830; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau*, May 13, 1832, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 5, Act 206; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau*, June 29, 1833, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 30, Act 797, NARC.

"Several of [the refugees] are accustomed to the service of their slaves since childhood. These are ties that can be called familial."[121] While the editorial not doubt referred to white refugee slave owners, "ties that can be called familial" is an apt description for the relations between free black owners and some of the people in whom they claimed property rights. Rosalie Chesneau's decision to purchase and eventually emancipate Sanite and Pamela was based on a spiritual kinship formed through the Catholic rite of baptism. Godparenting provided free people of color in Saint-Domingue and New Orleans an important means to forge ties between individuals and families. These bonds were particularly important in the absence of biological relations. Chesneau arrived in New Orleans as an older woman with no immediate family. She had no children, had never been married, and both her parents were deceased. She built a household and support system in the city with her nieces, her godchildren, and her slaves.

For other free women of color refugees, the connections between themselves and their slaves could be quite literally "familial." Christine Christian *dite* Mambeau, a *mulatresse libre* from Les Cayes arrived in New Orleans from New York in 1808. Both death and distance separated Christian from her immediate family in the wake of the Revolution.[122] Once in New Orleans, however, Christian reconnected with a member of her extended kinship network. On July 26, 1808, she purchased an enslaved woman named Marianne from Edouard Mahy de Chevenelle, a fellow refugee and former

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[121] Quoted in Lachance, "Politics of Fear," 192.

[122] *Testament*, August 21, 1808, Acts of S. de Quinones, Volume 10, page 641; *Codicile*, September 2, 1808, Acts of S. de Quinones, Volume 10, page 647; *Testament de Christine Christiane dite Mambeau*, October 5, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 420; *Inventaire des meubles effets, et titres délaissés par defunte Christine Christian dite Mambeau*, December 29, 1808, P.F.S. Godefroy, Volume 1, page 11, NARC.

inhabitant of Les Cayes.[123] In her will, Christian described Marianne as her "relative."[124] Christian's purchase took advantage of refugee connections to both reunite with a family member and benefit from owning a slave. Although she requested that Marianne eventually be freed by her heirs, Christian wanted her children to profit from Marianne's unpaid labor, as well. In each version of her will, she lengthened the amount of time Marianne should serve her children before they manumitted her.[125] A few weeks after she purchased Marianne, Christian bought Margueritte, a twelve-year-old creole of Louisiana, from Louis Georges Casimir Bourcier, another Saint-Domingue refugee.[126] In contrast to Marianne, Christian left no special instructions in her testaments in regards to Margueritte. The young enslaved girl, along with Christian's vast array of material goods passed on together as part of her estate to be divided amongst her three grown children.

Marie Justine Sirnir also became separated from her child in the upheaval caused by the Revolution. Although she attempted to reconnect with Celestin through Jean Maurau there is no evidence that Sirnir ever reunited with her son. Despite this loss, Sirnir created a new family during the three decades she spent in New Orleans. She married in 1812, but as she was middle-aged when she arrived in the Crescent City, Sirnir did not have any more children. She did, however, serve as godmother for two infants and cared for several children in her household much like they were her own. All of these relationships came about through Sirnir's slave ownership.

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[123] Sale of Slave, July 26, 1808, Slave Database, accessed March 3, 2012, http://www.ibiblio.org /laslave /individ.php?sid=41844, hereafter, Slave Database; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:130.

[124] *Testament*, August 21, 1808.

[125] *Testament*, August 21, 1808; *Codicile*, September 2, 1808; *Testament de Christine Christiane dite Mambeau,* October 5, 1808.

[126] [Slave sale], August 19, 1808, Slave Database, accessed March 2, 2012, http://www.ibiblio.org /laslave/individ.php?sid=41928; Debien and Le Gardeur, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana," 212; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 9:38; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 10:52.

The Ties that Bind

Sirnir did not arrive in New Orleans with slaves like Rosalie Chesneau nor did she participate in the last gasp of the legal transatlantic trade like Jean and Eugenie Moreau. The earliest definitive slave sale which involved Sirnir occurred on March 20, 1810.[127] On that day "Marie Justine Esther" purchased an enslaved woman named Laddy and her five year old son, Thomas, for $800. André Milne, acting as the proxy for J. B. Mouro and Company, sold the slaves to Sirnir. She bought Laddy and Thomas on credit, owing two equal payments at six and twelve months. In lieu of cash, Sirnir produced two notes for $400 each, payable at "the above determined deadlines" and "endorsed by Mr. Maurau."[128]

By endorsing the notes Sirnir used to pay, Jean Maurau guaranteed her obligation to the seller. If she was unable to make the payments, Milne or another representative for J.B. Mouro and Company could collect the money from Maurau. Backing Sirnir's purchase of Laddy and Thomas through endorsed notes did not require Maurau's presence at the recording of the transaction. Even so, Jean Maurau accompanied Sirnir to the notary's office for the sale, signing the document as a witness.[129] With this purchase Sirnir capitalized on her relationship with Maurau, utilizing this connection to provide her with credit and increase her own economic gain through an investment in slaves.

To secure her payment, a mortgage was placed on Laddy and Thomas until Sirnir paid in full. If she defaulted on the payments, the property rights in the two slaves would

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[127] There is a possible earlier sale from 1804. The details of the sale will be discussed below.

[128] *Vente d'esclave par Mouro & C.e à Marie Justine Esther*, March 20, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 22, page 169, NARC. "J. B. Mouro and Co." may have been Jean Baptiste Maureau, a Saint-Domingue refugee who served as editor of a newspaper, *L'Ami des Loi*, and was a justice of the peace. See City Directory, 1822.

[129] *Vente d'esclave par Mouro & C.e à Marie Justine Esther*, March 20, 1810.

return to J.B. Mouro and Company. Often these types of mortgages limited what the buyer could do with the slaves (i.e., sell or transfer the title to someone else) until full payment was made. The mortgage was lifted on April 1, 1811, and five months later Sirnir sold Laddy and Thomas to Charles White for $900.[130] She owned these two slaves for about a year and a half and earned a profit of $100 on the transaction.

The sale of Laddy and Thomas to White may have been planned for some time because Sirnir replaced the enslaved mother and son with another mother and child the day before the transaction was recorded. On September 2, 1811, she bought Sophie, a laundress and ironer, and Sophie's five year old daughter, Simonette from Rene de la Rue. Sinir paid $750 for the pair, less than what she paid for Laddy and Thomas.[131] With this purchase, Sirnir gained a skilled domestic worker and two female slaves whose potential reproduction could increase her slave labor force.

Sirnir's benefits came at the expense of Sophie's family. When De la Rue acquired Sophie in 1807, he bought her with her husband, Solomon, and their eighteen month old son, Victor. It seems that Victor did not survive, but the couple had Simonette soon after De la Rue purchased them.[132] Thus, De la Rue split the family apart when he sold Sophie and Simonette to Sirnir. It is unclear why Marie Justine Sirnir did not buy Solomon. Described as a carpenter, painter, and glazier, Solomon's skills would have

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[130] *Vente d'Esclave par Mre Julie Esther à Ch.s White*, September 3, 1811, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 26, page 389, NARC. White paid $600 upfront and owed the remaining $300 in one year. A mortgage was placed on Thomas. It was lifted on April 4, 1812. By 1814, White had freed Laddy. On December 19 of that year, he donated Thomas (as a slave) to her. On December 7, 1815, she sold a slave of her own to Jean Latapie. See *Mainlevée par Mre. Just.ne Esther fr. de Charles White*, April 4, 1812, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 27, page 61, NARC; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "Louisiana Slave Database" in *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1699-1860*, ed., Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, CD-ROM (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), entry no. 70453and entry no. 73892.

[131] *Vente d'esclave par Sr. René Delarue à M.ie Justine Cirnay*, September 2, 1811, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 6, page 433; *Vente de negre par Sr. Jarreau à Sieur de la Rue*, January 12, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 135, NARC.

[132] *Vente de negre par Sr. Jarreau à Sieur de la Rue*, January 12, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 135, NARC.

made him a profitable acquisition.[133] The purchase of Solomon, however, did not fit Sirnir's slave-buying pattern. She preferred female slaves and mothers and their children rather than adult men.

The exception to this pattern was Bernard, an enslaved man Sirnir bought about seven months before she sold Laddy and Thomas and purchased Sophie and Simonette. On February 14, 1811 "Mrs. Mary Wheaton, wife of Mr. Baptandière" sold "a black man (*nègre*) named Bernard about forty years old" to Sirnir for $868. Sirnir paid $500 of the total price to Wheaton upfront and promised to pay the remaining $368 to Claude Tremé in six months, which would take care of a debt of the same amount owed to Tremé by Wheaton.[134] In order to guarantee her payment, Sirnir placed a mortgage on her Faubourg Marigny lot in favor of Tremé. When Sirnir paid off the remainder of the sale price the mortgage on her real estate was lifted. This occurred seven months later on October 2, 1811.[135] At that point, Marie Justine Sirnir owned Bernard free and clear.

In addition to securing the purchase-money type of mortgage for the remainder she owed with her Faubourg Marigny property, Sirnir also borrowed money for the $500 down payment. She secured this equity mortgage with her Barracks Street property. On February 13—just one day before she bought Bernard from Wheaton—Sirnir received $350 from Henry Mentzinger to be used "for her particular needs." She promised to pay

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[133] *Vente d'esclave Rene Delarue à Alexis Cesar Bonamy & main levee partielle Deville Degoutin Bellechasse à Rene Delarue*, December 16, 1811, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 6, page 550, NARC. Even if she had wanted to buy Solomon, Sirnir may not have been able to afford him. De la Rue sold Sophie's husband on December 16, 1811 to Alexis Cesar Bonamy for $1,000. De la Rue had mortgaged Solomon in favor of Sieur Deville Degoutin Bellechasse in March of 1811, which restricted De la Rue's ability to sell Solomon. In order to complete the transaction with Bonamy, Degoutin Bellechasse had to give his permission and partially release the mortgage on Solomon. The money earned from the sale likely went towards the amount De la Rue owed. Sirnir may not have been able to meet the terms specified by De la Rue or his creditor in order to purchase Solomon.

[134] *Vente d'Esclave par Mde Wheaton à Marie Jn Sirnir*, Acts of N. Broutin, February 14, 1811, Volume 25, page 46, NARC.

[135] *Quittance par Claude Tremé à Marie Justine Sirnir*, Act of N. Broutin, October 2, 1811, Volume 26, page 421, NARC.

back the sum in five months. Although it took her over a year to reimburse Mentzinger, the lien on her Barracks Street lot was lifted on April 18, 1812.[136] That she mortgaged both pieces of her land to buy Bernard points to the significance of this purchase.

The record of the transaction between Sirnir and Wheaton reveals that Sirnir knew Bernard prior to the sale. It stated that Bernard was in Sirnir's possession at the time the sale was recorded and that she accepted the slave "with all of the diseases by which he can be attacked and his good and bad qualities, as she has known him for a long time."[137] This vague description of Bernard's "good and bad qualities" served a standard legal function. In fact, Mary Wheaton sold Bernard "without other guarantees" beyond that she had title to him and that she owed no debts against him.[138] This suggests that Bernard may have had a chronic illness or perhaps had run away at some point and therefore could not be "guaranteed free of redhibitory vices" by his mistress. By accepting Bernard and proceeding with the sale, Sirnir acknowledged these so-called "defects." The additional detail that Sirnir had known Bernard for a long time, however, is an uncommon feature for slave sales. The notary likely included it as explanation for Sirnir's acceptance of Bernard without Wheaton's warranty against "vices and maladies." Her decision to buy Bernard was clearly based on a previous association with him. Not only was Sirnir willing to purchase a slave without the usual guarantees, but she was prepared to place all of her real estate holdings on the line to do so.

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[136] *Hyp.tque par Marie Justine Sernir à H.ry Mentzinger*, February 13, 1811, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 25, page 44, NARC. Henry Mentzinger was a native of New Orleans and served in the army under the Spanish regime. He had several daughters with Gabrielle, his free black partner. Mentzinger owned property on St. Anne Street when he died in 1815. Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 11:300; *The Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carré Digital Survey*, HNOC, accessed November 25, 2013, http://www.hnoc.org /vcs/property_info.php?lot=19086, hereafter Vieux Carré Survey.

[137] *Vente d'Esclave par Mde Wheaton à Marie Jn Sirnir*, February 14, 1811.

[138] *Vente d'Esclave par Mde Wheaton à Marie Jn Sirnir*, February 14, 1811.

The mortgage on the Faubourg Marigny property was removed in October, allowing Sirnir to use the lot to secure other loans. On December 27, 1811 she borrowed $200 from "Mr. Jean Bueno" to be paid back "at his first requisition."[139] Sirnir may have used this money as part of the final payment for Sophie and Simonette. Having received the remaining $300 Sirnir owed, Rene De la Rue lifted the purchase-money mortgage on Sophie and her daughter on January 13, 1812.[140] In April of that year, Sirnir repaid her loans to Mentzinger and Bueno, removing all liens against her landed property. She received the final payment of $300 for Laddy and Thomas from Charles White around that time, which likely went towards these debts.[141]

On October 26, 1812 Marie Justine Sirnir became very ill and requested the presence of a notary to record her last will and testament. In addition to her two pieces of land, Sirnir explained that her properties consisted of "[t]he slaves named Seraphine about thirty-one years old and her young black child Noel ten months old, Sophie *négresse* thirty-five years old with her young black child named Simonette, of three years, and the black man Bernard of fifty-six years."[142] The purchases of Sophie and

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[139] [Mortgage], December 27, 1811, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 63, page 522, NARC.

[140] *Levée d'hypotheque Par Baron Bois Fontaine & Réné Delarue À Marie Justine Cirnay*, January 13, 1812, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 7, page 21, NARC.

[141] *Quittance et Mainlevée par M.r Just.ne Esther fr. de Charles White*, April 4, 1812, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 27, page 61; *Quittance et Mainlevée Jean Bueno à Marie Justine Sinere*, April 12, 1812, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 65, page 389; *Q.ce et mainlevée par Henry Mentzinger fr. De Marie J.ne Sirnin*, April 18, 1812, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 68, page 136, NARC.

[142] *Testament*, 1812. The ages of enslaved individuals given in sales and other records are seldom consistent and therefore often unreliable. There is a considerable discrepancy in the ages given for both Sophie and Bernard in the sale acts and those provided by Sirnir in her 1812 will. The 1811 sale records described Sophie as twenty-five years old and Bernard as forty years old, whereas the 1812 testament listed Sophie as thirty-five and Bernard as fifty-six. It is not entirely clear why this is the case. One reason could be that the vendors lowered the slaves' ages in order to receive a higher price from Sinir. It is also possible that Sinir exaggerated her slaves' ages in the will because she planned to emancipate Bernard, Seraphine, and Noel. Manumission laws at that time required slaves to be at least thirty years old in order to be emancipated. Younger slaves required special permission from the state legislature to be freed. Sirnir may have wanted to make sure Seraphine and Bernard fully met the age requirements and therefore raised the age of Sophie, too. This, however, does not explain why Bernard was "aged" sixteen years between the two documents. Additional evidence suggests that Bernard was born between 1758 and 1763, which means he

Simonette and Bernard are well-documented, but Sirnir's acquisition of Seraphine remains unclear. It is possible that she bought Seraphine and the sale was recorded under private seal (*vente par sous-seing privée*) rather than an "authentic act" of sale recorded by a notary. Private seal acts saved the costs associated with notary acts but were more easily contested. Often one of the parties involved eventually had the act registered by a notary. Otherwise, private seal acts left no trace in the public record.[143]

There is, however, one sale record for a slave named Seraphine that involves Jean Maurau's wife and a free woman of color named "Marie Esteve Moreau." Although the evidence is inconclusive, the slave in this act could be the Seraphine listed in Sirnir's 1812 will. On May 13, 1805, "Dame Marie Antoinette Moreau" bought "a *négresse* of the Arada nation thirteen years old, named Seraphine" from "Esteve Moreau, *négresse libre*" (referred to as "Marie Esteve" later in the document). The vendor acquired Seraphine from M.M. Fortier and Son on November 20, 1804.[144] Due to the notary's handwriting, it is possible that "Esteve" could be "Estere/Esterre," and therefore, "Marie Estere Moreau" could be another name used by Marie Justine Sirnir *dite* Esther. If this speculation is correct then this would be the only example of Sirnir using the surname Moreau in New Orleans. Given that she was likely owned by François Maurau in Le Cap, it would be a plausible choice. It would also not be unusual for Sirnir to then to decide to use a different name, perhaps as an act of remaking in her new residence. The age of

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was between the ages of forty-nine and fifty-four 1812. Seraphine's age was likely exaggerated in the 1812 will, too. Both Seraphine's emancipation record in 1831 and her funeral record in 1832 gave her age as forty years old. If these documents are accurate, then she could not have been thirty-one years old in 1812. It makes more sense for Seraphine to have been younger in 1812, given the number of children she had over the intervening years.

[143] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 93. See, for example, *Vente d'esclave par Ls. Bouder à Eugenie Moreau*, April 10, 1811 or *Dépot de pièce par Sr. Jean Maurau*, November 26, 1819, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 14, page 395, NARC.

[144] *Vente au Comp.t*, May 13, 1805, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 50, page 455, NARC.

Seraphine in the 1805 sale coordinates with the ages given for Sirnir's slave Seraphine when she emancipated her in 1831 and when Seraphine passed away in 1832.[145] That the record describes Seraphine as "Arada" is especially tempting to suggest that Sirnir's affinity towards this individual slave stemmed from a shared "nation" identity. However, if the seller was indeed Sirnir, then how did she regain possession of Seraphine? It is possible that Maurau donated Seraphine or sold her back to Sirnir, using either a private seal act or an even less formal method. An argument can be made that "Marie Esteve Moreau" is Sirnir, but without further evidence, this interpretation remains uncertain.

However she acquired Seraphine, Sirnir showed this enslaved woman preferential treatment in her 1812 testament. She named Seraphine as a legatee, providing her lifetime use of the house "that I presently inhabit with the portion of land on which it is built." In addition to bequeathing Seraphine a house in usufruct, Sirnir also made explicit arrangements for Seraphine, her son, Noel, and Bernard in her will. She declared that on the day she died Seraphine, Noel, and Bernard shall enjoy the rights had by all "free and freed of this state" for their "good and loyal service rendered to me since they have been with me." Sirnir requested that her executor follow all of the formalities of the law to emancipate the three slaves and to do so at the expense of her estate.[146] In contrast, Sirnir left no specific plans for Sophie and Simonette. Following her death, these slaves would have been sold to pay Sirnir's debts or transferred to Jean Maurau, whom Sirnir named as her universal legatee. The differential instructions Sirnir specified in her testament

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[145] [Emancipation Act], October 5, 1832, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 36, page 394, NARC; *Séraphine negresse esclave*, November 4, 1832, page 369, no. 2276 in *St. Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 9, Part 2, 1831-1832, AANO. In both of these documents, Seraphine is said to be forty years old. The Seraphine in the 1805 sale was said to be about thirteen years. She would have therefore been around twenty years old in 1812 and thirty-nine years old in 1831.

[146] *Testament*, 1812.

regarding her human property clearly set Seraphine, Noel, and Bernard apart from Sophie and Simonette.

By purchasing Sophie and her daughter from De la Rue, Sirnir proved willing to break up a family for her own gain as a slave owner. At the same time, Sirnir was forming a new family with people that she owned. The day after she recorded her will, Sirnir and her bondsman, Bernard, participated in a ceremony at St. Louis Cathedral that redefined their relationship from that of master and slave to wife and husband. On October 27, 1812 Marie Justine, using the name "Ester" married "Bernardo." Described in the record as "gravely ill," Ester, who was "of the nation Harrada [Arada], native of Guinea," received the last rites from the priest before he joined her in marriage to Bernard, "the legitimate son of Simon and Maria Juana, former slaves of the Ursuline nuns." The priest also administered the sacrament of penance to the couple after they confessed to "cohabiting." The witnesses to the ceremony included "Maria Antoinetta Moreau," Jean Maurau's wife and his niece, "the widow Moné."[147]

The marriage record designated both the bride and groom as free blacks, adding that Ester had purchased Bernard's freedom.[148] Having been born in New Orleans during Spanish rule, Bernard was familiar with *coartación*, a method of manumission that allowed a slave to purchase his or her freedom or have it purchased by a third party.[149] Bernard's parents and some of his siblings may have gained their freedom this way. It

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[147] *Bernardo, negro libre, con Ester negra libre*, October 27, 1812, No. 467, page 45 in *Saint Louis Cathedral: Marriages of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 1: 1777-1830, Part 1: Jan. 1777 to June 1821, AANO. The record is in Spanish, which is why the names are in the Spanish rather than French form.

[148] *Bernardo, negro libre, con Ester negra libre*, October 27, 1812.

[149] Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 25-26. If the master refused to agree on a price, the slave could take his or her owner to court where a price would be set.

seems likely that Bernard understood his purchase from Mary Wheaton as procurement of his freedom and that he lived with Sirnir as a free man.

No documents have been located that indicate Marie Justine had begun the emancipation process for Bernard. The Louisiana legislature had permanently ended the practice of *coartación* in 1807. The manumission laws in effect in 1812 required proof of the slave's good behavior for four years, public proclamation of intent to emancipate, and a forty day waiting period; all overseen by the parish judiciary and officially notarized.[150] Serious illness, inspiring actions like drafting a will and receiving the last rites, would also put people of uncertain freedom in a mind to secure their future. If Bernard lived with de facto freedom while Marie Justine was alive then providing for his liberty in her will would protect his freedom legally following her death. Moreover, the declaration of his free status in the marriage record gave Bernard another form of documentation that indicated he was no longer considered a slave.

Bernard may have used the surname "Couvent," which means convent, to further indicate his free status while referencing his family's connection to the Ursuline nuns. His parents, Simon Labelle and Marie Jeanne, gained their freedom from the Ursulines by 1778. The couple had at least five children, some of whom remained enslaved by the nuns and others who were freed.[151] From their establishment in French colonial New

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[150] Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 193-194; Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana*, 118; Judith Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 4. Slaves also had to be thirty years or older, although special permission could be granted to free younger slaves.

[151] Bernard had three brothers and one sister. The oldest sibling, Luis Labelle, was an Ursuline slave when he married Maria, another Ursuline slave on May 7, 1778. Rafael Labelle was free when he married Agata Charlota, also free, on January 1, 1779. Gabriel was still owned by the nuns when he married a free black woman named Marta Berducat on June 21, 1812. It is unclear if Bernard's sister, Marie Louise, ever married or gained her freedom. Rev. J. Edgar Bruns, trans., *St. Louis Cathedral Marriages of Persons of Color*, Volume 1, 1777-1830, 4, 96; *Rafael Negre libre con Agatha Carlota Neg.a libre*, January 1, 1779,

Orleans until Emancipation, the Ursulines owned and traded slaves, profiting from their labor in the convent and on several plantations that the nuns owned. An extensive kinship network, stretching several generations, formed among the Ursulines' slaves, in large part because the nuns insisted that their slaves undergo the sacraments of marriage and baptism and went to great lengths to keep family units together.[152] By maintaining an association with the convent, Bernard Couvent laid claim to this community of current and former Ursuline slaves and their families.[153]

A combination of reasons likely motivated Ester and Bernard to marry when they did. Religious considerations probably played a role in their decision to hold the ceremony. Believing that she was going to die, Sirnir would have wanted absolution for "cohabiting." She also would have wanted to legitimate her relationship with Bernard through the Church.[154] Bernard's upbringing in a family owned by the nuns served as a likely influence for him. Emily Clark argues that "[f]amily was clearly at the heart of this highly visible slave community. The most striking feature that emerges from the nuns' bondpeople is the predominance of nuclear families anchored by a mother and father

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page 3, no. 10 in *St. Louis Cathedral Marriages of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 1: 1777-1830, Part 1, Jan. 1777 to June 1821, AANO; Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Appendix 2 (Family N), 277.

[152] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 168, 170-177, Appendix 2.

[153] Other former Ursuline slaves used the surname "Couvent." See for example, *Testament de Rosette Couvent*, June 14, 1804, Acts N. Broutin, Volume 7, page 461. The surname "Couvent" also literally referenced the Ursuline convent in New Orleans, suggesting that this is where Bernard grew up (as opposed to one of the nuns' plantations outside of the city.) In several documents, he is referred to as "Bernard du Couvent" (Bernard of the Convent). See *Vente d'esclave Marie Justine Chirnaire épouse de Bernard du Couvent à Francisco Brunetti*, January 12, 1829; *Vente d'esclave Jules De Léaumont à Marie Justine Chirnaire épouse de Bernard du Couvent h.c.l.*, January 29, 1829, Acts of L. T. Caire, Volume 6, Act 34, NARC.

[154] Sirnir was not the only severely ill bride to be married in the Church. Other couples married under similar circumstances, although often these couples had had children together. Marriage legitimated these children, which gave them legal rights that children born out of wedlock did not have. Thus, legitimating children through the parents' marriage served as a compelling reason to go through the ceremony. However, other couples, like Sirnir and Bernard, were childless. Not every couple confessed to "cohabitating," although most did. See, for example, Bruns, *St. Louis Cathedral Marriages of Persons of Color*, 19, 22-23, 41, 98, 100.

living together under the official blessing of sacramental marriage."[155] Bernard's family fits this description, and he had models for matrimony in his parents and three brothers who all married in the Church.

Economic and social considerations may have also factored into the couple's decision to marry, although their specific circumstances complicate these common motivations. Scholarship on free people of color in colonial Saint-Domingue, in Spanish colonial New Orleans, and in the early American period in New Orleans indicates that individuals very often married for economic reasons.[156] As Kimberly Hanger points out, for individuals with "few resources to protect and pass on, marriage made little sense, especially considering the expensive fees one had to pay for the appropriate ceremony."[157] Sirnir, in fact, did have assets to bequeath and no forced heirs to inherit her property (or none that could be located, at least). She may have hoped that by marrying him, Bernard could receive more than just his freedom when she died. The likelihood of the marriage record overruling the testament in court, however, was probably not good. It is possible that she had an agreement with Jean Maurau, whom she named as universal legatee and executor in the will, to pass the property on to Bernard after legally freeing him.

Along with financial capital, social standing and connections between families gained through marriage also played an important role in decisions about whom to

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[155] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 170. Bernard did not marry Helena, the mother of his son. This, too, may have prompted the nuns to sell him.

[156] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 197; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 90; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 62, 88, 91.

[157] Hanger, *Bounded Lives,* 90. Ceremonies were also expensive in colonial Saint-Domingue. See King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 13.

marry.[158] Relationships between partners and the families they created together acquired official recognition and an added degree of respectability through matrimony, as well. This was particularly important when it came to inheritance laws. Deemed legitimate, children born to married couples had rights to their parents' property that children born out of wedlock did not have.[159] The 1808 *Civil Digest* expressly allowed marriages to legitimate children previously born to a couple. Emily Clark found that not long after the law went into effect "a rash of weddings legitimating well-established families ensued" among New Orleans-born free people of color.[160] This, however, was not the case for Sirnir and Bernard. The couple did not have any children together at the time of the wedding, and given their ages they were not likely to have any in the future.

Due to her severe illness, Sirnir and Bernard likely did not expect to have much of a future together as a married couple. Viewed as deathbed decisions, Sirnir's testamentary emancipation of Bernard and subsequent marriage to him (labeled, at least, as a free man) served as precautionary measures to protect and support her slave-turned-husband following her decease. It is likely, then, that the couple saw their marriage as a route to freedom for Bernard. Sirnir, in fact, may have believed the marriage record had legal bearing on Bernard's status. In colonial Saint-Domingue, the law allowed that if a master married his or her slave, the slave was freed. Stewart King found that free people of color utilized this method of emancipation to free their enslaved spouses without

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[158] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 197; Hanger, *Bounded Lives,* 90; Clark, *American Quadroon,* 62, 88, 91.

[159] Laws governing inheritance were also changed by the 1808 Civil Digest in ways that privileged legitimate children over "natural" children who were defined as born out of wedlock but acknowledged by the father. These measures were meant to restrict white men in unions with free women of color from passing on property to their children. For a discussion of the changes to inheritance laws see Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order,* 208.

[160] Clark, *American Quadroon,* 88. The provision excluded children "born from incestuous or adulterous connection."

having to pay the manumission tax.[161] This type of manumission did not exist in New Orleans, but sacramental records could serve as proof of free status, much like in Saint-Domingue.[162] Moreover, an intense struggle over the legal system in Louisiana throughout the territorial period created uncertainty about the laws and how they would be interpreted.[163] This, in turn, allowed for long-practiced customs, such as using the Church as source of official documentation to continue. It also created a space for people like Sirnir and Bernard to manipulate records in hopes of skirting the current manumission laws.[164]

In addition to the more restrictive emancipation procedures, the *Civil Digest* included legislation that placed severe limits on an individual's choice in marriage partner, confining marriages to those contracted between persons of the same race and status. While the law sought to curb partnerships between white men and free women of color, it also rendered marriages between free and enslaved individuals "void" and "celebration of such marriages...forbidden."[165] Matrimony across status lines occurred in New Orleans before the 1808 measure but was overall relatively rare. Between 1777 and

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[161] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 183. Most of the masters that married their slaves were free men of color, although King found examples of both white men and free women of color that married enslaved spouses. In King's sample, the brides were overwhelmingly the enslaved partner.

[162] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 9; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order,* 113. In the Spanish period, masters could manumit a slave with a notarial act or by the priest by baptizing a slave as free. Baptizing an enslaved child as free will be discussed in more detail before.

[163] Aslakson, "Making Race," 92, 94-96. The struggle over the legal system involved whether it would remain one based in civil law or conform to the common law system found in the rest of the United States. Unsurprisingly, the fight pitted French-speaking New Orleanians and Saint-Domingue refugees against Anglo-American residents and government officials. A compromise eventually resolved the dilemma, and a "hybrid" system a formed. While the criminal code and court system fell more in line with the American system, private law in Louisiana continued to be heavily based in a civil law tradition.

[164] Jennifer Spear discusses several different examples of "would-be manumitters" who "found ways around the new restrictions" on emancipations. She explains that "[s]ome slaves were merely declared free, perhaps in the hope that no one would check for a formal manumission act, although this left them in a precarious position if they were ever challenged." I believe this probably best describes Bernard's situation. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order,* 196-197.

[165] Clark, *American Quadroon,* 87-88. The law prohibited marriages between whites and people of African descent, too.

1813, the Catholic Church recorded a total of 222 marriages between people of African descent. Only fifteen of those marriages involved one enslaved and one free partner.[166] Nevertheless, the 1808 statutes on marriage meant that technically Bernard and Sirnir's nuptials were against the law. This legal obstacle could also explain the claim in the marriage record that Ester had bought Bernard's freedom.[167] Presenting Bernard as a free man was necessary to legally marry and, by doing so, produced a record that identified him as free.

When Sirnir and Bernard married in 1812 they joined the "march of Orleanians of color to the altar" that increased dramatically between 1809 and 1829. In her study of free women of color refugees in New Orleans, Emily Clark found that the number of marriages among free people of color doubled once between 1809 and 1819 and then again over the next decade. Clark argues, however, that Saint-Dominguans in general and women in particular fared poorly in the free black marriage market. Her analysis of the sacramental records reveals that between 1809 and 1819, only thirty-five of 141 marriages among free people of color involved refugees. Both partners in the marriage were refugees in half of those thirty-five weddings. Only six Saint-Dominguan women

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[166] These calculations are my own, using Rev. J. Edgar Bruns' translations of the marriage records from Saint Louis Cathedral. The translations are located at the New Orleans' Archdiocese Archives. Of the fifteen cross-status marriages, eight consisted of a free bride and an enslaved groom and seven involved an enslaved bride and a free groom. Emily Clark counted eleven of these marriages taking place before the 1808 ban. See Clark, *American Quadroon*, 87.

[167] The priest still married couples of different statuses after the ban. Bernard's brother, Gabriel, was married in the summer of 1812. The marriage record describes him as a slave of the Ursulines and the bride as a free black woman. See Bruns, trans., *St. Louis Cathedral Marriages of Persons of Color*, Volume 1, 1777-1830, 96, AANO. Even as late as 1834, an enslaved woman owned by the Ursulines married a free man of color. The ceremony was performed by the chaplain of the convent. See List of Marriages on Reel 13: *Des Negres et Negresses qui sont venus au Couvent sur notre habitation le 2 Octobre 1824*, Archive of the Ursuline Nuns of the Parish of Orleans, microfilm, 99-1-L, HNOC.

married free men of color born in New Orleans while eight free men of color refugees found native New Orleanian partners during this period.[168]

Demographics among the city's free black population explain these numbers, in part. Free women of color outnumbered their male counterparts throughout the Spanish period, and this disparity only intensified with the arrival of thousands of Saint-Domingue free women of color from Cuba in 1809-1810. In 1805, there were an estimated thirty-six free men of color for every 100 free women of color in the city. Although the 1810 census does not allow for sex ratio calculations for free people of color, the ratio of men to women among the refugees from Cuba was even more skewed. The proportion of men in the free black population had increased by the 1820s, but women still outnumbered men by more than two to one.[169]

This sexual demography made it difficult for free women of color to find marriage partners among free black men. Yet, it does not explain the large disparity in the number of New Orleans-born brides compared to the number of Saint-Dominguan brides. In the first decade following the arrival of refugees from Cuba, only one-fifth of free women of color in the marriage records was Saint-Domingue-born. Although this proportion rose to about twenty-seven percent in the 1820s, Clark calculates that the odds of a woman of Saint-Domingue ancestry marrying at the end that decade were only about one in one hundred.[170]

New Orleans free people of color clearly preferred to marry each other. Clark argues that this preference indicates an effort on the part of native New Orleanians to

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[168] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 61-62, 85-86, 89.

[169] Lachance, "Formation of a Three-Caste Society," 224, Table 6, 227; Paul Lachance, "Repercussions," 214, Table 14.2; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 62, 91.

[170] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 63, 91.

distance themselves from Saint-Domingue free people of color. The flood of refugees of African descent from Cuba coincided with the American government's attempt to reign in the city's existing free black population through restrictive legislation. Within this context, Clark reasons, "[m]arriage was a way for free black Orleanians to distinguish themselves from the Dominguan refugees, reassert their attachment to European cultural norms, and implicitly reject the interracial family formation that produced the trope of the politically treacherous *gens de couleur* of the Haitian Revolution."[171]

The union of "Ester" and "Bernardo" did not figure into Clark's tally of marriages between a Saint-Domingue free woman of color refugee and a New Orleans-born free man of color that took place between 1809 and 1819. Because she was African-born, the marriage record masked Sirnir's Saint-Domingue background, while it obscured Bernard's ambiguous status. Her African birth and former enslavement also placed Sirnir outside the parameters of Clark's focus on free women of color born in Saint-Domingue, many of whom were of mixed race. Indeed, Sirnir's marriage to Bernard appears exceptional when viewed within the free black marriage trends uncovered by Clark. It is, however, an exception that proves the rule. Sirnir found a native New Orleanian marriage partner, unlike so many other refugee women. Yet, her husband did not come from the small pool of free men of color in the city but the enslaved population. This choice required a good bit of maneuvering on Sirnir's part without offering her any obvious tangible assets.[172] For the free-born and often mixed-race creole refugee women at the center of Clark's study, this was a choice they were not likely to make.

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[171] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 88-89. On restrictive legislation passed in the territorial period see Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 179.

[172] Bernard may not have owned property, but he did have a skilled occupation, and as will be see in the following chapter, I argue that he provided Marie Justine Sirnir with social connections in the city.

Marie Justine Sirnir and Bernard Couvent remained married until his death in 1829. Sirnir never followed through with the legal procedures to emancipate Bernard. As long as she allowed Bernard to live as free, however, he gained his freedom through prescription after ten years.[173] This path to freedom seemed to work. Neither Bernard's status as a free man nor his marriage to Sirnir was challenged during the seventeen years between the wedding and his passing. During this time, Bernard kept a fairly low profile in the public record. This may have been a precaution or perhaps speaks to the dynamics of his relationship with Sirnir. He appears in no notary records save ones in which Sirnir was the principal actor. This suggests that he did not possess any property of his own.

At the same time, the couple created a paper trail that acknowledged both their marital status and Bernard's freedom. Beginning in 1818, notary records in which Sirnir bought, sold, or emancipated a slave explicitly stated that she was authorized to do so by her husband, Bernard Couvent, who was also present. Such consent was a legal formality, but it clearly recognized Couvent's rights as husband and head of household.[174] Several city directories also list Bernard Couvent as the head of household on Barracks Street. He

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[173] *Civil Code*, Article 3510, page 532. This path to freedom was eradicated in 1857. For more on freedom by prescription, see Schafer, *Becoming Free*, 30, 66, 113, 124.

[174] Under the laws governing marriages in the Louisiana Civil Code, a wife "cannot alienate, grant, mortgage or acquire either by gratuitous or incumbered title, unless her husband concurs in the act, or yields his consent in writing." This same article existed in the 1808 Civil Digest. It is unclear why it was not until May 1818 that this phrase begins appearing in records of Sirnir's transactions. See *Civil Code*, Book1, Title IV, Chapter 5, Art. 124, page 17; *Vte de negre Bd Couvant Marie Augustine Surnaire h de c l à Cesar Cadet*, May 4, 1818, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 37, page 159; *Vte d'esclave Sanite Goguet à Marie Justine Sirnaire*, October 27, 1818, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 37, page 360; *Mainlevée d'hypotheque par Bernard Couvent & Marie Augustine Sirnaire g. de c. l. à Cesar Cadet, h. de c.l.*, August 18, 1819, Acts of H. Lavergne, Volume 1, Act 61; *Liberté de Pauline*, January 14, 1822, Acts of H. Lavergne, Volume 7, Act 1077; *M. Ant.e Duvernay Vente d'esclaves à M.ie Justine Sirnir femme Bernard Couvent*, October 20, 1823, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 24, page 356; *Vente d'esclave Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de B.d du Couvent à Francisco Brunetti*, January 12, 1829; *Vente d'esclave Jules de Leaumont à Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de Bernard du Couvent h.c.l.*, January 29, 1829, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 6, Act 34, NARC. Under Louisiana's civil law, women had legal identities separate from their husbands and could own property. Husbands, however, had the right to manage the couple's community property but could not deny the wife's ownership of that property. See Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 41-42 and Sara Brooks Sundberg, "Women and the Law of Property under Civil Law in Early Louisiana, 1782-1835" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2001), 70-71.

first appeared in the 1822 directory as "Bernard Couvant, carpenter, 28 Barrack [Street] below Condé [Street]." Following his death, the 1830 City Directory contained two entries for "52 Barrack"—"Marie Justine Simayre" and "Mde. Bernard Couvant, widow."[175]

Sacramental records also confirmed Simir and Couvent's marriage when the couple appeared before the priest as godparents or brought children born to enslaved women in their household to be baptized. Bernard had likely witnessed the strong bonds that could form between individuals and families through godparenthood as a young slave of the Ursulines. Simir also probably recognized the important work spiritual sponsorship did towards creating networks among free people of African descent in Le Cap.[176] Godparenting established and reinforced kinship ties. For people of African descent whose families could be divided—both literally and figuratively—by the legal statuses of free and slave, godparenthood offered an effective means to bridge these divisions.

The Couvents' participation in two baptisms that occurred on May 17, 1814 illustrates the important role this sacrament played in creating family connections across status lines. In what were likely back-to-back ceremonies, Claude Thomas, a Saint-Domingue refugee and the assistant priest at St. Louis Cathedral baptized two baby boys. Entry number 183 in the baptism register was for Noel, the son of Seraphine, "*negresse* belonging to the said Dame Bernard." Father Thomas explained that the child was "duly

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[175] 1822 City Directory; 1830 City Directory, microform, HNOC. The 1823 directory lists "B. Couvant" at 54 Barrack. "Marie Justine Simay" appears in the 1827 City Directory at 52 Barrack. Simir is also described as "Bernard Couvent, widow" in the 1832 directory.

[176] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 177, 181, 184-187; King, *Blue Coat and Powdered Wig*, 13, 231-233. In Cap Français, King found members of what he refers to as "the military leadership group" utilizing "family acts" (weddings, funerals, baptisms/godparentage) as a way of creating "pseudo-kin ties" with both free and enslaved people.

free according to a formal declaration that has been made by Madame Bernard, *negresse libre*, his mistress." Noel's godparents were a free black woman named Phânie and Sirnir's husband, Bernard Couvent.[177] Entry number 184 recorded the baptism of Bernard, *negre libre*, the son of Bernard, a free black carpenter and Rosette, a free black woman, both of whom were natives of New Orleans. The child's godparents were "Bernard Couvent, *negre libre*, and Madame Bernard, his wife."[178] Together, these two records capture a moment of family-blending, linking Sirnir and her slaves, Seraphine and Noel, to her husband, Bernard Couvent and his namesakes—son, Bernard and new grandson, Bernard.[179]

As the godfather of both Bernard and Noel, Bernard Couvent confirmed kinship ties to one child and provided them to another. This may have held particular meaning in regards to Noel, marking his change in status from slave to free. Although Seraphine did not gain her freedom at this time, the ceremony could have formalized her place in the household, as Sirnir's favored slave and now the mother of a free child. Over the next two decades, Marie Justine, Bernard, Seraphine, and Noel lived together. Notary documents and sacramental records can only hint at the nature of their relationships with

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[177] *Noel, negre lib par Madame Bernard negresse lib*, May 17, 1814, No. 183, pages 24-25 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 14, part 1, 1814-1815, AANO.

[178] *Bernard, negre lib de cette ville*, May 17, 1814, No. 184, page 25 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 14, part 1, 1814-1815, AANO. Father Thomas recorded Bernard's birthdate as January 1, 1812 and Noel's birthdate as November 22, 1812. However, these dates must have been switched because Sirnir's 1812 will described Noel as ten months old in October of 1812. He, therefore, could not have been born in November of 1812 and ten months matches a January 1812 birthdate.

[179] Sirnir's husband had a son with an enslaved woman named Helena in 1792. The couple named the child Bernard and had him baptized as free in 1797. In records, Bernard's son is referred to variously as Bernard Couvent, Bernard Couvent *fils* (jr.), and Sanon Bernard Couvent. I will use Bernard Couvent *fils* to distinguish him from his father, Bernard Couvent. Like the elder Couvent, Bernard Couvent *fils* was a carpenter and had several children with his long-time partner, Rosette Jacques. Couvent *fils* will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5. See *Bernardo Lambert negro libre*, April 9, 1797, page 354, no. 452, St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans, Baptism, 1792-1798, accessed December 7, 2013, http://archives.arch-no.org/sfpc.php.

one another structured by complex dynamics of power along gender, status, and economic lines. Yet, the records do suggest that Marie Justine Sirnir formed "ties that can be called familial" with these three individuals.

The family grew with the addition of five more children born to Seraphine over the years. The identity of the father (or fathers) of these children remains unknown. Sirnir had Seraphine's children baptized and emancipated at least two of them. The children grew up in the Couvents' household and conceivably were treated more like free dependents than slaves. On April 22, 1813, Seraphine had another son. Although he was commonly called Sanon, the child was baptized in June 1814 under the name George Thomas.[180] Seraphine had a daughter named Ezaline around 1825 and a son named Jules in 1829.[181] She had another daughter the following year. This baby was named Marie Justine after her godmother, "Justine Vve Bernard." Seraphine had her sixth child in May 1832. She was baptized as Anastasie in August. Seraphine passed away a few months later, and her two young daughters likely died, too.[182]

The family Sirnir created with Bernard, Seraphine, and Seraphine's children resembled in some ways the social organization of many West African societies with slaves. Slaves were valuable assets in these societies because families and kinship groups gained wealth and social prestige through the incorporation and command of others. Slavery was one of several unequal social relationships organized by economic

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[180] *George Thomas negro esclavo de Justine negra libra*, no. 249, page 34 in St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color, Volume 14, Part 1: 1814-1815, AANO.

[181] *Marie Uzaline Bernard*, October 25, 1839, no. 691, page 281 in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 Death Record, January 1- December 31, 1839, AANO. I have yet to locate Ezaline or Jules' baptism record, but both children were surely baptized. In her 1832 will, Sirnir refers to Noel as Jules' godfather

[182] *Marie Justine fille [d.c. lib.] et nat*, June 19, 1830, no. 1018, page 173 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 22, Part 1, June 1829-June 1830; *Anastasie à Marie Justine Sirnet*, August 5, 1832, no. 970, page 140 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 23, Part 1, August 1831-September 1832; *Séraphine negresse esclave*, November 4, 1832.

transactions, including adoptions, pawning, and marriages. In contrast to New World slavery, which defined the system through property rights, slavery in pre-colonial Africa was understood as an absence of kinship ties. Defined as outsiders, slaves held a marginal position in the family and larger kin group to which they were enslaved. This outsider status could be alleviated, however, by creating ties with the master's family and eventually being incorporated into the kin group. The movement from slave/outsider to kin/insider was not guaranteed and could happen over generations. Suzanne Meirs and Igor Kopytoff argue that this process occurred along a " 'slavery'-to-kinship continuum" that progressed from a "chattellike position" towards "quasi-kinship and, finally, kinship." This, they claim, "gives African 'slavery' its particular stamp, in contrast to many other slave systems."[183]

This is not to say that Sirnir consciously emulated a static "African" idea of slavery or even that such a replication was possible. However, it is conceivable that Sirnir's early childhood in the Bight of Benin region and enslavement in Saint-Domingue among a largely African-born slave population shaped the ways in which she understood owning people. These cultural influences blended with New World practices of slavery that emphasized the commercial aspects of owning people within a capitalist system.[184] Sirnir clearly recognized the economic value of slave ownership and utilized most of the people she bought and sold to her profit. Her relationships with specific individuals, however, suggest that she also understood slave ownership as a means to build

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[183] Kopytoff and Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," 11, 14, 17, quote on 24; Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 8-9, 13-14; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 91; Timothy Buckner, "The Slave Trade's Apex in the Eighteenth Century," in Falola and Roberts, *The Atlantic World*, 97-98.

[184] Stewart King found that slave ownership among Saint-Domingue free people of color differed in some ways from that of whites. He suggests that this could point to African cultural influences working in "subtle" and "nearly unconscious ways." King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 84, 119-120. James Sweet's work on Domingo Álvares also influenced my thinking about Sirnir's African background and slave ownership. See Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 91.

associations and a base of support. Sirnir organized her household in a way that maximized the meaning of owning people, commanding labor and capital and creating family connections and a sense of belonging.

If viewed with a "slavery-to-kinship" spectrum in mind, Noel's baptism shifted him from slave/outsider status towards incorporation into Sirnir's kin group. The ceremony also altered his status from slave to free—the logical progression according to the dictates of New World slavery. Sirnir fulfilled her intention to emancipate Noel by instructing Father Thomas to baptize the young child as free. She utilized the sacramental records as a way to circumvent the manumission laws that required an emancipated slave to be at least thirty years old. Freedom through baptism had served as a legitimate means of emancipation in New Orleans under Spanish rule. Despite the territorial government's changes to the manumission laws in 1807, slave owners continued to request enslaved children to be baptized as free, and the priests complied.[185] On February 25, 1810, for example, a free woman of color named Rosette Vivant allowed the daughter of her slave Annette to be baptized as free. Father Thomas labeled the young girl as a "free black" in the sacramental records after receiving a note from her mistress "dated the 18th of this month and by this note she is declared free and signed Rosette Vivant residing in this city."[186]

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[185] Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order,* 113, 194, 196. Spear found that while only one-fourth of manumissions of slaves under thirty years old were granted through baptism before 1807 the proportion rose to one-half after the law went into effect in September 1807. Even baptisms recorded as late as 1832 declared that the enslaved child was baptized as free. See *Marie enf. D.c.l. et naturalle*, November 12, 1829, No. 445, page 79 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 22, part 1, June 1829-1830 and *Marie Louise d.c.l.*, April 29, 1832, No. 668, page 95 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 23, part 1, August 1831- September 1832, AANO.

[186] *Marie Noel, negresse libre de cette ville*, February 25, 1810, No. 278, page 55 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 2, part 1, 1809-1810, AANO.

Although no longer a legal form of manumission, baptizing an enslaved child as free indicated that the master did not consider that individual as a slave. Rosette Vivant made this clear in her testament recorded fourteen years later: "In the formal intention where I have always given liberty to the child of one of my slaves, which child of the female sex named Rozeline is about eleven years and belonging to my *negresse* Annette. I did present her as free at the baptismal font as free from birth."[187] In order to preserve Rozeline's freedom in the case of her death, Vivant took the added precaution of manumitting Rozeline in her will. She declared that if Rozeline's status was contested, she "gives full and absolute liberty" to the child, "wishing that she be considered as free as I have considered her the same since birth."[188] Sirnir likely felt her 1812 will protected Noel in the same way. Noel's freedom through baptism appears to have sufficed, as no other emancipation record has been located for him.

Noel's experience notwithstanding, Rosette Vivant's testament indicates that slave owners recognized the ambiguous and potentially risky legal standing of children baptized as free. In order to rectify that ambiguity, some owners eventually completed the required steps to lawfully emancipate such individuas. Rosalie Chesneau, for example, took advantage of a change in the manumission statutes in 1827 to formally liberate Marcos Andres, the son of her slave Marie Joseph. Marcos Andres was born in New Orleans on July 24, 1810 not long after his mother and mistress had arrived from Cuba. Due to his age, Marcos Andres could not be freed without special permission from the state legislature. As "it has always been her intention to free Marcos Andres and [she] has

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[187] *Testament de Rosette Vivant*, April 29, 1824, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 26, page 39, NARC. Rozeline's name given at her baptism was Marie Noel, after her godfather, Noel, an enslaved man also owned by Vivant. That she was commonly called Rozeline further suggests the close bond she had with her mistress, whose own name was Rosette.

[188] *Testament de Rosette Vivant,* April 29, 1824.

considered him as free since his birth," Chesneau had Marie Joseph's son baptized as free in 1811.[189]

When Marcos Andres reached the age of eighteen, however, Louisiana lawmakers modified the emancipation rules. As long as the slave had been born in the state, a master could petition the local police jury to grant freedom to a slave of any age. On August 18, 1828, Chesneau requested permission to manumit Marcos Andres. Her petition explained that "[she] now wishes to confirm in a more legal manner the freedom which she always intended to give him and which he has now enjoyed uninterruptedly for 18 years and whereas by the legislative act approved on the 31st day of January 1827 an opportunity is now offered to your Petitioner without waiting till the said Marcos Andres attains the age of thirty provided your Honor and the police jury of the parish authorize her to do so." Despite Chesneau's outright acknowledgement that she allowed Marcos Andres to live as a free man, the policy jury granted her request to emancipate him "in a more legal manner."[190]

To support her petition, Chesneau offered the baptism record as proof of Marcos Andres' age and birthplace as well as the fact that she had always considered him free. Testimony by three witnesses further bolstered Chesneau's request. Each witness claimed that Marcos Andres "has always behaved well and that he has learned a trade by means of which he is able to get honestly his livelihood being a joiner and carpenter." Perhaps Marcos Andres' good character and ability to support himself swayed the members of the

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[189] *Affranchissement par Rosalie Chesneau f.d.c. et l. de nommé Marcos Andres de 18 ans*, October 6, 1828, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 1, Act 242, NARC; *Marcos Andres mulato libre Chesneau*, February 6, 1811, no. 47, page 8 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 12, part 1, 1811-1811, AANO. Marcos Andres was in utero when Chesneau recorded her first will in 1810. If Chesneau had died, Marie Joseph would have received her freedom, as would Marcos Andres, provided he was born after his mother's emancipation.

[190] *Affranchissement par Rosalie Chesneau f.d.c. et l. de nommé Marcos Andres*, October 6, 1828.

jury. After the notices of the intended emancipation were posted for forty days with no opposition, notary Theodore Seghers recorded Marcos Andres' official "liberty to enjoy from this day and to perpetuity" on October 6, 1828.[191]

The policy jury oversaw emancipation requests from 1827 until 1846. A study conducted of the jury's files by Laurence Kotlikoff and Anton Rupert reveals the active participation of free black slave owners in manumissions. During those years, free people of color petitioned for over one-third (37.5 %) of the successful emancipations, manumitting 646 of the 1,770 slaves (36.5%) freed by the police jury. Although some free black slave owners presented more than one petition over the years, a total of 361 different individuals made requests to emancipate their slaves. Kotlikoff and Rupert conclude that the volume of manumissions indicates the considerable slave ownership among free people of color. In 1830, free people of color owned one in seven slaves. Compared to slaves owned by white masters, enslaved people had an estimated 3.5 times greater chance of being emancipated if owned by a free person of color.[192]

Biological ties accounted for a number of manumissions made by free black owners. The records contained numerous details for the years 1827 to 1834, including reasons for the emancipation and the relationships, if any, that existed between the emancipated person and the former owner. Over this period, at least sixty-three percent of those men, women, and children manumitted were related to the free person of color

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[191] *Affranchissement par Rosalie Chesneau f.d.c. et l. de nommé Marcos Andres*, October 6, 1828. One of the witnesses was Charles Belot, a carpenter and native of Port-au-Prince. Marcos Andres apprenticed with Belot to learn the woodworking trade. The other two witnesses were Jean Baptiste Azereto, an Italian man whose free black partner was from St. Marc and Henry Guillon/Guilhou, a free man of color and also very likely a Saint-Domingue refugee.

[192] Laurence Kotlikoff and Anton Rupert, "The Manumission of Slaves in New Orleans, 1827-1846," *Southern Studies*, 19 (Summer 1980): 172n1, 177, 179-180. The authors explain that the rate of emancipation is based on a fixed ratio of slaves owned by whites and free people of color. Since this ratio likely fluctuated over this period, the probability of a slave gaining his or her freedom based on race of owner fluctuated as well.

presenting the petition. This suggests that a considerable proportion of free black families contained members held in bondage. One such petitioner was Henry Fletcher, Sirnir's executor in the 1832 will. On December 14, 1836, Fletcher requested permission to manumit the three and a half year old Marie Louise, "his natural daughter slave." The police jury approved the petition in February and Marie Louise officially received her freedom on May 17, 1837.[193]

In some form or another, Marie Justine Sirnir freed a total of seven of the twenty-five slaves she owned during her time in New Orleans. Four of the seven people included her husband, Bernard, and three of Seraphine's children—Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline. Because evidence of their official manumission has yet to be located, Sanon and Ezaline may have gained their freedom through prescription. Sirnir allowed them to live as free, and their status was reinforced by subsequent documentation.[194] Sirnir emancipated the other three slaves through "a more legal manner." All three were adult women, which matches the overall pattern of emancipations. Between 1827 and 1846, more the two-

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[193] [Emancipation], May 17, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, page 152, NARC. The identity of Marie Louise's mother is unknown. She was born while Fletcher's wife, Heloise Laville, was still alive. Laville signed the baptism record for Marie Louise, who was baptized as free. Fletcher owned at least two enslaved women at the time of Marie Louise's birth. See *Marie Louise d.c.l*, April 29, 1832, no. 668, page 95 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 23, Part 1, August 1831-September 1832, AANO; Marriage contract Henry Fletcher with Heloise Laville, October 19, 1827, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 21, page 309; [Sale of Slave], December 17, 1831, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 35, page 430; [Inventory], February 20, 1835, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 49, page 44; [Sale of Slave], September 5, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 57S01, Act 156; *Manumition Hy. Fletcher to Armantine, Janvier, & Ferdinand*, September 22, 1852, Acts of A. Chiapella, Volume 29, Act 617, NARC.

[194] *Testament*, 1832; [Family Meeting], September 6, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 1, page 408; [Quittance], December 15, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 2, page 302, NARC; *Marie Uzaline Bernard*, October 25, 1839, no. 691, page 281 in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 Death Record, January 1- December 31, 1839, AANO; Probate Court Suit no. 1322, Succession of Ezaline Bernard, December 15, 1839, VCH282 1839-1840 #1310-1373, microform, NOPL.

thirds (68%) of emancipated slaves were women and women made up sixty-five percent of slaves manumitted by free people of color.[195]

Sirnir first freed a woman name Pauline following the legal procedures. On October 27, 1818 Sirnir purchased Pauline from Sanite Goguet, a free woman of color and fellow refugee. Goguet acquired Pauline, an African-born woman described as "of the Caravaly nation" from Mr. Landen in Saint-Domingue. Sirnir paid $800 for Pauline at the time of sale, which was made "under the express condition that [Sirnir] will give [Pauline] her liberty freely at the time she judges appropriate." Until that time, Sirnir could not sell, rent, or alienate the enslaved woman in any manner.[196] In other words, Sirnir could own Pauline for as long as she wanted but could never transfer her ownership to anyone else. Eventually, Sirnir had to manumit Pauline and do so without reimbursement from Pauline for her freedom.

Sirnir owned Pauline for over three years before she petitioned Judge James Pitot to emancipate her slave. In November 1821, "Bernard Couvent and Marie Justine Cirnaire his wife" posted notices of their intention to emancipate Pauline. Her liberty was officially recorded by notary Hugues Lavergne on January 14, 1822.[197] The motivation behind Sirnir's purchase and subsequent emancipation of Pauline is unclear. Agreeing to the sale under the condition to free Pauline meant that Sirnir essentially paid $800 for Pauline's freedom. Sirnir and Goguet may have had an arrangement outside of the sale or Pauline may have reimbursed Sirnir, despite the restrictions outlined in the sale record.

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[195]Kotlikoff and Rupert, "The Manumission of Slaves in New Orleans," 179. Female slaves made up over half of the enslaved population in New Orleans during these years. Women made up the majority of emancipated slaves in New Orleans during the Spanish period and in colonial Saint-Domingue. See Hanger, Bounded Lives, 28; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 108.

[196] *Vte d'esclave Sanite Goguet à Marie Justine Sirnaire*, October 27, 1818.

[197] *Liberté de Pauline*, January 14, 1822, Acts of H. Lavergne, Volume 7, Act 1077, NARC. In 1821, the parish judge oversaw emancipation petitions rather than the police jury.

Adding a condition to a sale was uncommon, but there are other examples in the notary records.[198] Often the slave and buyer were related, although this was not always the case. When Jean Maurau sold his slave, Beatrix, to Antoine Villard in 1821 it was under the condition that Villard free Beatrix immediately at his expense.[199] Similar sales occurred in colonial Saint-Domingue. Stewart King suggests that these conditions served "to protect the slave against reenslavement if the purchaser's property were to be attached for debt or the purchaser to die before consummating the manumission."[200] This seems to be the case for Pauline's sale since the timeline for her emancipation was left up to Sirnir.

Ten years after emancipating Pauline, Sirnir freed Seraphine and Fillette. Sirnir first stated her intention to manumit Seraphine in her 1812 will. Why she waited so long to legally grant Seraphine her freedom remains unclear. Sirnir acquired Fillette and her four children in 1823. She petitioned the police jury to manumit both women on August 23, 1831. Once granted her request, Sirnir recorded Fillette and Seraphine's emancipations with notary Carlile Pollock on October 5, 1831. From that day forward Seraphine and Fillette would be "free person[s] and entitled to all civil privileges as such."[201] A case can be made for Sirnir's close affiliation with Seraphine as reason to manumit her, but Sirnir's emancipation of Fillette is less clear. It is possible that Fillette's

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[198] Using Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's "Louisiana Slave Database," I counted seventy-five emancipation clauses in slave sales between 1805 and 1820. The database includes a total of 57,320 sales during that period but not all of these took place in New Orleans and some entries are doubled, if multiple slaves were purchased at one time.

[199] *M. Jean Maureau vente d'esclave avec condition d'affranchisement à Ante. Villard h.d.c.l*, April 4, 1821, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 19, page 120, NARC. For an example of a sale with the condition to free a slave related to the buyer see Slave Database, http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=79832, accessed December 9, 2013.

[200] King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 111.

[201] *M. Ant.e Duvernay vente d'esclaves à M.ie Justine Serner Femme Bernard Couvent*, October 20, 1823; [Emancipation], October 5, 1831, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 36, page 394; [Emancipation], October 5, 1831, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 36, page 395, NARC.

Saint-Domingue background played a role in the decision.[202] Free women of color slave owners in New Orleans commonly made decisions to manumit a few, select slaves while selling or bequeathing others.[203] Unfortunately, the documents that recorded such decisions rarely reveal the motivations behind these choices.

Marie Justine Sirnir's Slaveholding Patterns

Sirnir may have manumitted a few of her slaves, but the overwhelming majority of the people she owned in New Orleans remained in bondage. Surviving the illness that compelled her to record a testament in 1812, Sirnir proceeded to continue her investment in human property. Over the next twenty years, she acquired an additional eighteen slaves. She purchased most of these people, but at least six of them were babies born to enslaved women in the household. Despite the substantial number of enslaved people Sirnir obtained between 1812 and 1832, she owned only five slaves when she recorded her second will. By this time, Sirnir had manumitted four of these eighteen slaves.[204] Others, particularly a few of the children, may have passed away.[205] At least four of the slaves Sirnir acquired after 1812, however, were sold. Sirnir made a profit on each of these sales, ranging from $20 to $325. Economic exploitation marked the greater part of Sirnir's slave-owning experience.

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[202] Fillette Bernard, April 18, 1855, State of Louisiana, Orleans Parish, Recorder of Births and Deaths Office, Volume 14, page 332, microfilm, NOPL; [Slave Sale], March 12, 1817, Slave Database, accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=70533.

[203] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 149-153.

[204] Two of these four slaves were Pauline and Fillette, whose emancipations are discussed in detail above. The other two were George Thomas/Sanon and Ezaline, two of Seraphine's children. Although manumission records for these children have not been located, they both were free by the time Sirnir passed away in 1837 and likely grew up as free in the household.

[205] Five of the sixteen slaves acquired by Sirnir between 1812 and 1832 disappear from the record. Four of these slaves were children. Given the high death rates in nineteenth century New Orleans, it is possible that they died. If sold, the records have yet to be recovered. The fifth slave was a woman named Théodore, whom Sirnir purchased in 1829. She was not listed in the 1832 will and record of Sirnir selling her has not been located. She, too, may have succumbed to a disease or possibly ran away.

In her extensive investigation of free women of color slave owners in New Orleans, Anne Ulentin determined that "the majority were profit-maximizing businesswomen."[206] Between 1810 and 1820, free women of color participated in over 1,500 slave sales involving more than 2,000 individual slaves. Ulentin's analysis reveals both the breadth of slave ownership among free black women in the city as well as common trends in slaves purchased and the ways free women of color utilized their human property. The data indicates that a clear gender preference existed among free black women slave owners. Free women of color bought and sold far more enslaved women than men. Ulentin explains that a combination of factors determined this including "the gender-based uses for which a slave was intended, higher prices for male slaves, and the existence of a predominantly female slave population."[207] Women and children purchased or sold together made up about fourteen percent of Ulentin's sample. In most cases, free women of color sold children with their mothers; however, they were not averse to selling children separately.[208]

Marie Justine Sirnir's slaveholding fits the overall profile of New Orleans free women of color slave owners uncovered by Ulentin. The majority of the slaves Sirnir purchased were women or girls. On February 2, 1815, she bought a fourteen year old girl named Marie Rose from Jean Rousse for 380 *piastres*.[209] About a year later, Sirnir purchased Mirza from Marianne Le Prevost. She paid $400 for the thirty-five year old

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[206] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 3.

[207] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 96. Female slaves made up seventy-two percent of people owned by free women of color and around sixty percent of the total enslaved population in New Orleans were women and girls. Hanger found a similar situation in Spanish New Orleans as did King in Saint-Domingue.

[208] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 88, 95-98.

[209] *Vente D'esclave par Jean Rousse à Marie Justine*, February 2, 1815, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 32, page 5, NARC.

woman.[210] Sirnir owned neither of these women for very long. She sold Marie Rose one year later to Catherine Josephine Journu, a resident of the Faubourg Marigny. Over that year, however, Marie Rose had become pregnant and delivered a baby. Sirnir sold the one month old child to Journu along with Marie Rose on January 30, 1816 for $20 more than she had paid Rousse.[211] Mirza remained with the Couvents for almost two and a half years. On May 4, 1818, Sirnir, authorized by her husband Bernard, sold Mirza to Cesar Cadet, a free man of color. This sale produced a profit of $150, although Cadet made the payments in two installments.[212] As discussed above, Sirnir bought Pauline from Sanite Goguet in 1818 and freed her three years later. She also purchased a middle-aged woman named Théodore from Jules de Leaumont on January 29, 1829.[213] It is unclear what became of Théodore. Sirnir did not list the enslaved woman among her human property in the 1832 testament and no sale record has been located.

In addition to her purchase of individual female slaves, Sirnir also bought women with children. Her acquisitions of Laddy and Thomas and Sophie and Simonette have been detailed above. Sirnir's largest outlay for slaves at one time involved a mother and her four children. On October 20, 1823 Sirnir bought Fillette with her six year old son, Silvain, five year old daughter, Euridice, two and half year old Orphise, and Louis, a three month old baby. Sirnir purchased the family from Antoine Duvernay for $1200.[214] Fillette had another daughter six years later. The baby was baptized with the name

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[210] *Vente d'Esclave par Veuve LeSeur Fontaine à M.ie Agu.ne Sirney f.c.l.*, January 19, 1816, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 34, page 39, NARC.

[211] *Vente d'Esclave par Marie Justine f.c.l. à Mlle. C. J. Journu*, January 30, 1816, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 34, page 70, NARC.

[212] *Vte de negre Bd Couvant Marie Agustine Surnaire h de c à Cesar Cadet*, May 4, 1818.

[213] *Vente d'esclave Jules De Leaumont à Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de Bernard du Couvent h.c.l.*, January 29, 1829.

[214] *M. Ant.e Duvernay Vente d'esclaves à M.ie Justine Serner femme Bernard Couvent*, October 20, 1823. Sirnir paid $600 to Duvernay at the time of the sale. She used a note endorsed by "M. Moreau" as credit to pay the remaining $600 in one year.

Josephine on June 4, 1829.[215] Although Fillette received her freedom in 1831, Sirnir continued to own Silvain and Euridice (referred to as Redisse) in 1832. By 1850, two of Fillette's daughters had gained their freedom and lived with their mother on Tremé Street. "Fillette Bernard" died there in 1855 at the age of 55.[216] The fate of Orphise and Josephine are unknown.

The reproduction capabilities of female slaves likely factored into the decisions free women of color slaveholders made about the people they purchased.[217] From an economic point of view, Sirnir increased her investment in human property through the procreation of Fillette, Seraphine, and Marie Rose. The children these women had in Sirnir's household enlarged her labor force and offered potential profits through sale. Once the children reached a certain age they could perform domestic duties, much as Sirnir did as an enslaved child in Le Cap. Children also increased the size of the household, which may have served as a symbol of status for Sirnir.[218] As she became older, enslaved youth could have been easier to control. Sirnir was seventy-five years old when she recorded her 1832 will. She listed five slaves in her testament, all of whom were between the ages of eight and fourteen.[219]

The difference in the ways Sirnir treated the enslaved mothers with children born while she owned them suggests that other considerations were at work. Sirnir sold Marie Rose and her unnamed infant shortly after the child was born. She did not, however, sell

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[215] *Josephine negritte esclave à Madame Veuve Bernard,* June 4, 1829, no. 6, page 2 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms Slaves and Free People of Color,* Volume 22, Part 1, June 1829-June 1830, AANO.

[216] Population Schedule for the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Roll *M432-236,* page *392B, Image 448,* accessed May 20, 2012, www.ancestry.com; Fillette Bernard, April 18, 1855.

[217] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 96.

[218] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 96, 98; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig,* 106-107. King suggests that children born to enslaved women owned by free people of color in Saint-Domingue could be seen as redolent of "the African paradigm" in which children "were junior or second-class members of the household and increased the owner's social position."

[219] 1832 *Testament.*

Seraphine, Fillette, or their children. Instead, she had these infants baptized and emancipated both mothers. Yet, most of Seraphine's children received their freedom, whereas Fillette's children did not. In her 1832 will, Sirnir left Fillette's son, Silvain, to her executor Henry Fletcher. She did place this bequest under the condition that Silvain be freed, but not until Fletcher died. Fillette's daughter, Redisse, was to be sold by the Recorder of Wills, along with two other slaves to cover Sirnir's debts. In contrast, Sirnir named Seraphine's children as beneficiaries, providing for their future through a bequest of property.[220] The range of actions Sirnir demonstrated towards these enslaved mothers and their children implies that a distinct hierarchy existed in the household among her human property.

The identity of the fathers of Seraphine and Fillette's children are noticeably absent in the existing records. The baptism register reiterates this silence. In fact, only the entry for George Thomas/Sanon explicitly mentions an "unknown father." The other entries simply describe the individual as the child of "Seraphine, slave of Marie Justine Sirnet" or "natural daughter of Fillette, black female slave of Madame Widow Bernard."[221] The law by which a child's status followed that of the mother codified the "invisibility of the father" of children born to enslaved women like Seraphine and Fillette.[222] Thus, the circumstances under which these children were conceived remain unknown. The pervasive sexual exploitation of enslaved women must certainly be taken into account. It is possible that Bernard fathered some of the children, but this is difficult

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[220] 1832 *Testament.*

[221] *George Thomas negro esclavo de Justine negra libra*, no. 249, page 34 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color,* Volume 14, Part 1: 1814-1815; *Josephine negritte esclave à Madame Veuve Bernard* , no. 6, page 2 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 22, Part 1, June 1829-June 1830; *Anastasie à Marie Justine Sirnet*, August 5, 1832, no. 970, page 140 in *St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 23, Part 1, August 1831-September 1832, AANO.

[222] Morgan, *Laboring Women,* 109.

to determine.[223] The relative freedom of movement accorded to slaves in urban environments may have permitted Seraphine and Fillette to develop relationships with other enslaved or free men in the city. If so, no evidence for the fathers' involvement with the children exists. The children born to her bondswomen certainly augmented Sirnir's slave holdings. The effect of these births on the enslaved mothers, however, remains unclear. The archival records obscure Seraphine and Fillette's experiences of motherhood as readily as the priest rendered invisible the name of the children's fathers.

Most of the male slaves Sirnir owned were children purchased with their mothers or born in the household. Outside of her husband Bernard, who lived as a free man, Sirnir bought only one other enslaved adult male.[224] On April 27, 1818, Sirnir purchased François, an African-born man about thirty-five years old from a free woman of color named Jeanne Catherine Beauchamp. Sirnir owned François briefly, selling him to Jean Pigneguy seven months later.[225]

The circumstances of the exchange of François between Beauchamp, Sirnir, and Pigneguy are unusual and illustrate Sirnir's business savvy when it came to profiting from slave trading. Sirnir bought François from Beauchamp for 275 *piastres* without guarantee. The sale record stated that François suffered from rheumatism, which explains the low price of this adult male slave. When she sold François seven months later to Jean Pigneguy Sirnir did so without guarantee, again citing François' joint issues. Pigneguy, however, paid Sirnir $600 for the enslaved man, which earned her a $325 profit on the

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[223] When Noel died in 1837 his funeral record stated that his parents were the late "Pognon Bernard" and "Seraphine Sirnair." It is unclear to whom "Pognon Bernard" refers, but the surname Bernard is intriguing. See Noel Bernard, June 10, 1837, no. 281, page 55 in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 Death Records, January 1837 to December 1837, AANO.

[224] Sirnir owned an enslaved young man named Pierre in her 1832 will, but it is unclear when and how she acquired him.

[225] *Vente d'Esclave par J. C. Beauchamp à M. J. Sirney*, April 27, 1818, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 12, page 205; [Slave Sale], November 2, 1818, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 13, page 520, NARC.

sale. What makes this transaction curious is that fact that Jeanne Catherine Beauchamp originally purchased François from Jean Pigneguy and his brother, Louis Aime. She was also made aware of François' condition before the purchase. Beauchamp owned him for fifteen days before selling him to Sirnir for $275—the same price she paid the Pigneguy brothers.[226] What compelled Jean Pigneguy to buy François back for more than twice as much as he originally sold the slave to Beauchamp is not clear. Perhaps Jean disagreed with his brother about selling François to Beauchamp and decided to buy the enslaved man back on his own. Whatever the reason, Sirnir capitalized on an opportunity to collect a sizeable profit on the transaction.

According to Ulentin, most of the slaves owned by free black women were described as "black" rather than with a label indicating racial mixture. Three-quarters of slaves traded by free women of color were born in Louisiana, whereas fifteen percent were born in the Caribbean, seven percent were African-born, and only two percent were born in other parts of the United States.[227] Sirnir's slaveholding matched these patterns as well. She owned only one slave that the records described as a "*mulatre*."[228] All of her other slaves were "*negres*" and "*negresses*." While the birthplace or origin of the enslaved individual is not always included in the records, this information can be discerned for some of the people Sirnir owned. At least three of her slaves—Sophie, François, and Pauline—were African-born.[229] Pauline was also a Saint-Domingue

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[226] [Slave Sale], April 13, 1818, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 12, page 164; *Vente d'Esclave par J. C. Beauchamp à M. J. Sirney*, April 27, 1818; [Slave Sale], November 2, 1818.

[227] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 99, 101-102.

[228] The only enslaved person Couvent owned described by a term that indicated racial mixture was Thomas, whom she bought with his mother, Laddy, in 1810 and sold in 1811.

[229] Seraphine may have been born in Africa, too.

refugee, as were Fillette and Théodore.[230] Mirza was likely from Saint-Domingue, too. Refugees Mathias Peychaud and his wife, Henriette Morel bought Mirza in Jamaica and then sold her in New Orleans to Jean Baptiste Le Seur Fontaine, a former resident of Le Cap. Following his death, Fontaine's estranged wife, Marianne Le Prevost bought Mirza and a house at his estate sale. Le Prevost sold Mirza to Sirnir two years later.[231]

Saint-Domingue connections mattered to Sirnir and continued to inform her decisions about slave purchases after living in New Orleans for several decades. In the ten acquisitions made by Sirnir, seven of the vendors were Saint-Dominguans.[232] Even her final purchase of human property involved the heirs of Pierre Lambert, a refugee from Cap Français. When Sirnir died on June 28, 1837, she was in the process of buying an enslaved woman from Lambert's estate. An inventory taken of Lambert's property in February 1837 included a declaration from his family "that sometime past they sold unto Justine Sirnir widow Bernard Couvent a negress slave named Maria alias Celeste for the sum of twelve hundred dollars, which amount is to be included in this inventory as so much ready money, the act of alienation of said slave is passed before this undersigned notary."[233] According to Sirnir's own inventory, taken in July, the sale had not yet been completed. Notary Carlile Pollock, who recorded both inventories, explained that Sirnir had deposited money with him "intended to be applied in part payment for a slave she

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[230] *Vte d'esclave Sanite Goguet à Marie Justine Sirnaire,* , October 27, 1818; Fillette Bernard, April 18, 1855; *Vente d'esclave Jules De Leaumont à Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de Bernard du Couvent,* January 29, 1829.

[231] [Slave Sale], August 18, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 318; [Sale of House], September 10, 1814, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 4, page 282; *Vente d'Esclave par Veuve LeSeur Fontaine à M.ie Agu.ne Sirney f.c.l.*, January 19, 1816. Fontaine was the director of the New Orleans theatre and the editor of the newspaper, the *Moniteur de la Louisiane*. For more on Fontaine and Le Prevost see René Le Gardeur, "The New Orleans Theatre 1792-1803," *Southern Quarterly* 44 (2007): 85-115.

[232] The total of ten purchases includes the one in process when Sirnir died in 1837. Five of the vendors are definitely from Saint-Domingue and three others are strongly suspected to be refugees.

[233] *Inventory of Estate of Pierre Lambert*, March 13, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 1, page 71, NARC.

was about to purchase of the succession of the late Dr. Lambert." Because the "purchase has not been accomplished," Pollock still had the funds and included them in the total value of Sirnir's estate.[234] The whereabouts of Maria alias Celeste at the time of Sirnir's death is unknown.

Although the origins cannot be determined for all of the people purchased by Sirnir, it seems that most, if not all, were born in Louisiana, the Caribbean, or Africa. None of Sirnir's slaves were described as "American" or were said to have come from another state in the Union. The one exception was possibly Laddy and her son, Thomas, whose names suggest that a previous owner was Anglo-American. Sirnir bought the mother and son from a French-speaking seller, however. Aside from Bernard, Sirnir acquired all of her bondsmen and women from Francophone vendors.

That this was a conscious choice on Sirnir's part is supported by the fact that New Orleans imported thousands of enslaved men, women, and children each year from outside of Louisiana. The interstate slave trade accelerated in the post-War of 1812 boom as cotton and sugar production continued to increase and more people began to settle in the Deep South states. New Orleans quickly became the main destination market for these "American" slaves. Most of the imported slaves arrived on coastwise vessels shipped from Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland.[235] Professional slave traders facilitated the movement of enslaved people between the Upper and Lower South, and subsequently slave trading firms set up businesses in the city. A number of these firms established their offices, showrooms, and slave pens near the intersection of Moreau and

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[234] Inventory of Estate of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow Bernard Couvent, July 15, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 1, page 376, NARC.

[235] Rothman, *Slave Country,* 188, 198-199; Johnson, *Soul by Soul,* 2, 5-7; Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan Pritchett, "The Domestic United States Slave Trade: New Evidence," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (Winter 1991), 459-460.

Esplanade Streets. Located just inside the Faubourg Marigny, these lots were only a block or so from Sirnir's Barracks Street property. Traders exhibited their "merchandise" along the street in front of their buildings where "as many as a hundred slaves might occupy a single block."[236] According to Jonathan Pritchett and Mallorie Smith, "[i]n 1830, the majority of slaves sold in New Orleans were imported from outside the state, and interregional slave traders imported most of them."[237] Moreover, inhabitants of the city purchased almost half of the imported slaves that year.[238] The sheer volume of "American" slaves transported to New Orleans and sold after 1815 and the close proximity of trading headquarters to Sirnir's residence points to a deliberate effort on her part to purchase Francophone slaves with either local or Saint-Domingue roots.

Again, this fits with the overall pattern of free black slave owning in the city. Ulentin found that only a small percentage of enslaved individuals owned by free women of color were "American." Focused on the decade between 1810 and 1820, her sample ends as importations of slaves from the Upper South began to increase significantly. The trend appears to have continued, however. Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan Pritchett found that free people of color bought only two percent of the 2,273 imported slaves sold in 1830. Although the proportion was small, two percent of the total means that forty-eight enslaved people were purchased by free black slaveholders that year.[239]

Rosalie Chesneau was one such free woman of color slave owner who branched out beyond the local market. On November 21, 1829 she purchased Araminta from slave

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[236] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2. Moreau Street is now called Chartres. In the nineteenth century, Chartres ran from Canal to Orleans and then became Condé between Orleans and Esplanade. When it crossed Esplanade and became the Faubourg Marigny, Condé became Moreau.

[237] Jonathan Pritchett and Mallorie Smith, "Sequential Sales as a Test of Adverse Selection in the Market for Slaves," *Journal of Economic History*, 73 (June 2013), 490.

[238] Freudenberger and Pritchett, "The Domestic United States Slave Trade, 461.

[239] Freudenberger and Pritchett, "The Domestic United States Slave Trade," 461, fn 18.

trader John Sanders of Washington County, Virginia. The act of sale, recorded in English, described Araminta as "a slave for life, twelve years old, four feet ten inches high." About a month prior to Chesneau's purchase, Sanders bought the young girl from Henry Adams in Somerset County, Maryland.[240] Araminta was clearly sold away from her family, although whether this occurred with the initial sale between Adams and Sanders or in New Orleans remains unknown. Most likely she traveled to New Orleans onboard a ship from Norfolk. In 1830 that trip took an average of nineteen days. Araminta probably lived in a crowded slave pen for about two weeks before Chesneau purchased her from Sanders. In this she was fortunate since the average time between arrival in New Orleans and sale was about forty days in 1830.[241]

Adjusting to her new place in Chesneau's household was imaginably difficult. Araminta had been separated from her family and transported 1,000 miles away to a strange place. She would have to learn French and adapt to urban living. Chesneau utilized the young girl as a domestic and continued to own Araminta, whom she referred to as Myrthé, until her death in 1833. At some point, Araminta ran away. [242] Perhaps she attempted to return to Maryland or to seek out someone that she met on the forced trip to New Orleans. It was not uncommon for recently purchased slaves to run away from their new owners. Walter Johnson reasons that "[f]or these slaves...sale marked a moment

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[240] Sale of Slave by John Sanders to Rosalie Chesneau, November 21, 1829, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 2, Act 451, NARC.

[241] Freudenberger and Pritchett, "The Domestic United States Slave Trade," 470-472. Somerset County is on the southern end of the eastern shore of Maryland. Thus, Norfolk would have been closer than Baltimore.

[242] *Inventaire des biens dépendant de la Succession de feu Rosalie Chesneau*, September 9, 1833, Acts of L. T. Caire, Volume 32, Act 957; *Vente d'esclave Estelle Maillat à Eugenie Macarty*, April 26, 1834, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 37A, Act 435, NARC.

when slavery suddenly became unbearable, when changed conditions made escape, with all its dangers, seem preferable to living a life assigned in the slave market."[243]

It is unclear when Araminta made her escape, but she was either caught or returned on her own. Her flight may have occurred while Chesneau was alive and could explain the changes that Chesneau made to her will in regards to "Myrthé." In the 1830 version, Chesneau left her new slave to Pamela, whom she had recently emancipated. After serving Pamela for eight years, Chesneau instructed that Myrthé be freed. In 1832 Chesneau changed her bequest, leaving to Pamela "in full property for always Myrthé or Araminte." Her final will, recorded shortly before her death, also kept Myrthé in bondage. This time, however, the "*negresse americaine*" would belong to a free woman of color named Estelle Maillat, "in reward for the care that [Maillat] has always" provided to Chesneau. Fany Dadigrand, Chesneau's niece and universal legatee, had possession of Myrthé until April 25, 1834 when she officially delivered her to Maillat. The very next day, Maillat sold Myrthé to Eugenie Macarty, a free woman of color. Maillat guaranteed the slave for vices and maladies except that of running away because she had absconded once.[244] It is possible that following Chesneau's death, Araminta took advantage of the change in the household to escape. Whatever led to her decision to run away, Araminta overtly challenged the circumstances of her enslavement by taking flight.

Enslaved men, women, and children owned by free women of color performed a variety of tasks.[245] Araminta was one of two "house domestics" owned by Rosalie

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[243] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 194.

[244] *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau f. de c. & l.*, August 10, 1830; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau*, May 13, 1832; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau*, June 29, 1833; *Déliverance de legs Veuve Populous alias Pétion à Estelle Maillat*, April 25, 1834, Acts of L. T Caire, Volume 37A, Act 430; *Vente d'esclave Estelle Maillat à Eugenie Macarty*, April 26, 1834, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 37A, Act 435, NARC.

[245] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 112, 114-119.

Chesneau when she died. She also owned a middle-aged woman named Marianne, described as a laundress in her estate inventory, and Octavie, "a cake peddler."[246] Other free women of color owned highly skilled slaves. In 1818 Rosette Toutant sold an enslaved man named Abraham whose occupations included carpentry, barrel-making, and wheel-making. He also had experience as a teamster, farmer, and miller.[247] In a single transaction, Catherine Clergé *dite* Pouponne bought a boat and four enslaved men in order to transport goods to market and possibly operate a fishing operation as well.[248]

The inventory taken of Marie Justine Sirnir's estate also assigned occupations to four of her slaves. Pierre and Silvain, ages twenty-one and nineteen, respectively, were listed as "day laborers." This label indicates that Pierre and Silvain had not received extensive training in a particular trade. Rather, they were hired out for various jobs. They may have helped out with construction of new homes and buildings in the city, loaded and unloaded boats on the levee, or delivered goods and supplies. Sirnir's inventory described thirteen year old Silvanie and seventeen year old Redisse as "house servants."[249] They served Sirnir in her home by cooking, cleaning, and washing.

A few of the notary records did include specific skills for a couple of Sirnir's slaves. The sales act for Sophie described her as a laundress and ironer.[250] In the two decades Sophie belonged to Sirnir, she handled the household's laundry. Sirnir may have also accepted other people's linens and clothing to be washed and pressed by Sophie for a fee. Mirza also had ironing expertise as well as dress-making skills. Sinir likely

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[246] *Inventaire des biens dépendant de la Succession de feu Rosalie Chesneau*, September 9, 1833, Acts of L. T. Caire, Volume 32, Act 957, NARC. The inventory did not provide occupations for Chesneau's three other slaves.

[247] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 189.

[248] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 112-114.

[249] Inventory of Estate of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow Bernard Couvent, July 15, 1837.

[250] *Vente d'esclave Marie Justine Chirnaire ep.se de B.d du Couvent à Francisco Brunetti*, January 12, 1829.

capitalized on Mirza's sewing ability to earn income by selling garments made by the enslaved woman.[251]

Only a small window onto the types of tasks Sirnir had her slaves performed can be gained through the sale acts. The notary records, in general, rarely mention an enslaved individual's skills or occupation. It does not automatically follow that most slaves sold in New Orleans were unskilled, however. A comparison between sale acts, newspaper advertisements, and estate inventories in 1830 reveals that advertisements often described a slave as skilled, but the notary records made when the slave was sold omitted this information. For example, advertisements described 74.3 percent of enslaved women as domestics but the notary acts listed only 4.1 percent of female slaves sold in 1830 as skilled in the domestic arts.[252] This suggests that most of the enslaved people owned by Sirnir possessed one or more specific skills, despite only a few described as such in the records.

Ulentin argues that New Orleans' port economy offered numerous opportunities for free women of color to successfully conduct a variety of entrepreneurial activities. Many of these ventures involved the unpaid labor of enslaved men and women. In particular, free women of color dominated in "retailing and provisioning."[253] Free and enslaved women of African descent sold all manner of products, including produce

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[251] [Sale of House], September 10, 1814, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 4, page 282, NARC. In his journal, Benjamin Latrobe described an enslaved woman owned by a boardinghouse keeper, who, in addition to "waiting, & making beds, [was] expected to make two shirts a day (& night) for the benefit of her mistresses [sic] private purse. See Benjamin Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches, 1818-1820,* ed., Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 53.

[252] Jonathan Pritchett and Jessica Hayes, "The Occupations of Slaves Sold in New Orleans: Missing Values, Cheap Talk, or Informative Advertising," Tulane Economics Working Paper, accessed December 17, 2013, http://econ.tulane.edu/RePEc/pdf/tul1113.pdf, 1-2, 9-10, 13, 19-20. Pritchett and Hayes include "seamstresses, cooks, pastry cooks, washers, ironers, house servants, waiters, domestics, carriage drivers, hairdressers, nurses, and bakers" under the term "domestics." See Table 2, page 24.

[253] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 107, 118, 162, 188, 192.

grown in city lots or in nearby rural areas, seafood and meat, or baked goods. They also sold dry goods like linens, shawls, scarves, and handkerchiefs. Some women operated out of stores or the market along the levee. Others hawked their goods in the streets.[254] According to Virginia Gould, "Marketing was one of the most important economic, social, and political activity [sic] of slave and free women of color" in New Orleans.[255]

These women's highly visible presence sparked architect Benjamin Latrobe's curiosity when he lived in New Orleans between 1819 and 1820. He wrote, "In every street during the whole day women, chiefly black women, are met, carrying baskets upon their heads calling at the doors of houses." After observing the practice, Latrobe determined that "[t]hese female pedlars [sic] are slaves belonging either to persons who keep dry good stores, or who are too poor to furnish a store with goods, but who buy as many at auction as will fill a couple of baskets, which baskets are their shop." Although he believed that this was "a very unprofitable mode of dealing," Latrobe explained that it continued because enough inhabitants supported themselves "by the labor of their slaves upon this traffic." This, in turn, forced store owners to employ door-to-door saleswomen, too.[256]

Enslaved women may have most often filled the position of *marchande* (market woman), but free women of color also worked as retailers in the streets and markets. Some of these women likely honed their marketing skills as slaves and continued these activities after gaining their freedom. Free women of color *marchandes* worked for themselves or were hired by others to sell their wares. A number of free black women

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[254] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 53-56; Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 55, 115-118.
[255] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 54.
[256] Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans,* 101. Latrobe explained that the "retail trade is so far worthy of notice as it forms one of the characteristic features of this city at present." See Latrobe, 102.

also owned female slaves who sold goods in shops, in the market, and door-to-door. Some of these women, like Eulalie Mandeville, "amassed considerable fortunes through street peddling."[257]

Evidence suggests that Marie Justine Sirnir participated in the retail trade. Her estate inventory contained a significant number of items commonly sold by *marchandes*, including "185 handkerchiefs" worth $20.00 and "25 schawls" worth $8.25. Along with these textiles, the appraisers listed "remnants of merchandise" valued at $5.00.[258] The description is vague but highly suggestive of dry goods retail activity on Sirnir's part. She may have started out selling the goods herself but likely relied on female slaves for the bulk of the labor. Seraphine is a prime candidate for this occupation. Sirnir owned Seraphine for a long time, and her close relationship with Seraphine denotes trust between the two women. Pauline, the African-born woman from Saint-Domingue may have also worked as a *marchande* before Sirnir freed her. This could have been a skill Pauline brought with her to New Orleans and may explain why Sirnir was willing to pay a high price for Pauline with the condition to manumit her.

It is very likely that Sirnir also arrived in New Orleans with experience as a *marchande*. As discussed in Chapter Two, free and enslaved women of African descent dominated the marketing and retail trades in colonial Cap Français. Quite plausibly Sirnir may have sold goods, first as a slave, and then as a free woman in Le Cap. Her able

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[257] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 54, 56, 58, 150. Eulalie Mandeville was one of the wealthiest and largest slaveholding free women of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans. She owned a dry goods business that employed free women of color and enslaved women she owned to sell items throughout the city. See Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 196.

[258] Inventory of Estate of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow Bernard Couvent, July 15, 1837; Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty," 56, 150; Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 55. Latrobe relates a story about a customer inquiring about shawls in Mrs. Herries dry good store. Not having money with him, the customer wondered if Mrs. Herries' "woman was out with shawls," and if she could stop by his house. Latrobe observed that the shawls the man intended to purchase "cost from 28 to 50 dollars each, and were many of them exceedingly handsome." See Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, 101.

navigation of urban life in New Orleans supports this scenario. Once in the city, Simir's connection with Jean Maurau also likely aided her start in the retail business. Various notary records and city directories refer to Maurau as a "*marchand*."[259] For men, this label usually designated a shop keeper as opposed to a "*negociant*," which denoted a businessman or broker. Maurau's estate inventory also included two trunks of "old merchandise" enumerated along with his household linens and apparel. Moreover, the notary recording the inventory described Maurau's slave Justine as "accustomed to the employment of hawking and peddling."[260] The Mauraus' slave Beatrix was also described as a "*marchande*" in the record for her sale to Antoine Villard.[261] When Simir and the Mauraus arrived in New Orleans she may have sold goods for Jean's retail business. Over time, Simir earned enough money to purchase enslaved women to work for her and branch out on her own. Meanwhile, the Mauraus purchased two enslaved women (both from Saint-Domingue) to sell their goods. For Justine's part, Maurau emancipated her in his will, instructed that she be allowed to remain in the house as long as his niece owned it, and provided her with $400 to start her own business.[262]

The income Simir earned through her retailing enterprise was likely supplemented by carpentry work undertaken by Bernard. In addition to the revenue gained through the labor of her slaves, trading in human property served as an important source of economic activity for Simir. Viewed as a whole, Simir's transactions followed a pattern of buying and selling in quick succession. For example, Simir bought François and one week later

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[259] See for example, 1823 City Directory; 1824 City Directory; *Testament* 1812.

[260] *Inventory Estate of Jean Maurau*, September 1, 1829, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 26, page 331, NARC.

[261] *M. Jean Maureau vente d'esclave avec condition d'affranchisement à Ante. Villard h.d.c.l*, April 4, 1821, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 19, page 120, NARC.

[262] *Will Jean Maurau*, July 15, 1828, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 23, page 514, NARC. "Miss Justine Moreau" is listed at Jean Maurau's address, 81 Rampart, in the 1832 City Directory. By 1838 she had moved to 12 Bagatelle in the Faubourg Marigny. See 1832 City Directory; 1838 City Directory.

sold Mirza. Five days after buying Pauline, Sirnir sold François. This cycle of buying one slave and promptly selling another occurred five different times between 1811 and 1829 and involved nine individuals. The period between these paired transactions ranged from one day to two weeks. In some cases, the slaves purchased basically replaced those subsequently sold. For instance, Sirnir bought Sophie and her daughter Simonette and sold Laddy and her son Thomas the very next day. Eighteen years after buying Sophie, Sinir sold the now fifty year old woman to Francisco Brunetti for $350. She then replaced Sophie with forty-five year old Théodore, whom she purchased a few weeks later for $600.[263] Only in the case of Sophie did Sirnir lose money on a resale. She probably did not expect to earn a profit on this sale after owning the enslaved woman for almost two decades. Her decision to sell Sophie, in fact, may have been the most profitable one she could make in regards to the older slave. A week after Brunetti bought Sophie he began the emancipation process for her.[264] While Sophie received her freedom, Sirnir earned $350 to put towards purchasing another slave.

Compared to some free women of color in New Orleans, Sirnir participated in slave trading on a small scale. Louise Bonne Lalanne, for example, clearly earned her living through buying and selling slaves. A refugee from Les Cayes, Lalanne recorded forty-six notary documents between 1810 and 1820, forty of which involved slaves. Ulentin determined that Lalanne traded slaves at the rate of about four people a year. She

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[263] This sequence of transactions makes little economic sense on the surface. However, it is plausible to suggest that Sirnir wanted an older female slave who could perform the same labor that Sophie did (laundry, ironing). In addition, the structure of the household likely required another adult woman to help out with the numerous children who lived there. Not only did Sirnir likely employ the mothers, Seraphine and Fillette, as market women, they each had children born in 1829. Théodore had raised three children of her own and thus could help out with the children while performing other jobs within the household. The fact that Théodore came from Saint-Domingue may have also made her an attractive choice for Sirnir.

[264] *Affranchissement Franc. Brunetti à la negresse Sophie Madeleine*, March 10, 1829, Acts of L.T. Caire, Volume 6A, Act 195, NARC. The Sheriff signed the notices required to be posted for forty days before manumission was approved on January 20.

owned no one related to her, emancipated none of her slaves, and made a profit on every transaction.[265] Sirnir's trading did not reach that level of activity. Yet, compared to someone like Rosalie Chesneau, Sirnir played an active role in the local slave market. In total, Chesneau and Sirnir owned about the same number of slaves in New Orleans. Yet, Chesneau made only three purchases in the city, one of which was her goddaughter Sanite and Sanite's daughter Pamela. The only recorded sale act involved Chesneau selling Toussine to her mother, Marie Zilia.[266] Overall, Chesneau made far less transactions than Sirnir.

In November 1832 Marie Justine Sirnir once again fell ill and recorded a second testament. In listing her properties, Couvent named four slaves: "Pierre, about fourteen years old, Redisse, about thirteen years old, Silvanie, about eight years old, and Sylvain about 14 years." Redisse and Sylvain were two of Fillette's children. Sirnir bequeathed Sylvain to Henry Fletcher, her executor and universal legatee, "under the express condition that he will free him at the death of said Fletcher and that his estate will pay the cost of his emancipation." Sirnir specified that Redisse, however, would be sold, along with Pierre and Silvanie, to pay for any debts.[267]

Although she only named four slaves when describing her estate, Sirnir referred to a fifth slave later in the document. She declared, "I bequeath to Noel a young slave named Jules and child of Seraphine of whom he is the godfather."[268] As Seraphine's

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[265] Ulentin, "Shades of Grey," 88, 92, 94.

[266] Chesneau owned at least twenty slaves while in New Orleans. Thirteen of these twenty people eventually received their freedom (or were children sold to their emancipated mothers). The others were sold, bequeathed, or disappear from the record. There are some records that may have been made under private seal or not located. She likely sold the slaves she acquired from Fortunat, for example. In addition, there is one woman whom Chesneau has baptized in 1813 but I have yet to find when Chesneau acquired her or what happened to her.

[267] *Testament*, 1832.

[268] *Testament*, 1832.

oldest son, Noel was also Jules' half-brother. Sirnir did not liberate Jules outright perhaps because manumission laws at the time required a $1,000 bond to guarantee that the emancipated slave would leave the state.[269] She likely believed that leaving Jules to his brother and godfather was the best alternative for the young boy. By omitting Jules from her list of properties, Sirnir marked his position in the household as distinct from that of the other slaves. Yet, this did not change the fact that Jules' status rendered him a piece of property. However he may have lived in Sirnir's household while she was alive, there were no guarantees that he would continue to be treated that way after her death.

Sirnir bequeathed her property on Barracks Street to Noel, and his siblings, Sanon and Ezaline. In contrast to Jules, the other "children of Seraphine now deceased" were free and could therefore legally inherit property. Taking care of Seraphine's children after her death would be one way Sirnir could honor the relationship she had with her former slave. Sirnir also left "a sum of 200 *piastres* to Sanon Bernard Couvent, natural son of my late husband."[270] With Celestin only a memory by 1832, Marie Justine chose to pass on her property to her next of kin—the surviving members of the family she created with Bernard, Seraphine, and Seraphine's children. She reinforced her ties to Seraphine's children with her bequests to Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline. Her legacy to Bernard Couvent *fils* recognized the extended family she gained through her marriage to a slave named Bernard.

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[269] Schafer, *Becoming Free*, 6. In their study of the policy jury records, Kotlikoff and Rupert found that the law requiring emancipated slaves to leave the state was never enforced. All of the manumissions approved between 1830 when the law was passed and 1846 when the police jury ceased approval of manumissions included the phrase "without being compelled to leave the state." See Kotlikoff and Rupert, "The Manumission of Slaves in New Orleans," 173. Sirnir likely did not know that application of the law was law and did not want to risk Jules' deportation.

[270] *Testament*, 1832.

Like many of her free women of color cohort in New Orleans, Sirnir utilized her slave ownership in diverse and complex ways. Slaveholding allowed her to construct and support a family with Bernard and Seraphine, but it did so at the expense of others like Sophie and Simonette. Traversing the lives of both free and enslaved blacks, these relationships expose how kinship and property ownership complicated one another. In slavery, family could also be property. But in some instances, as Dylan Penningroth argues, "property helped 'make' family."[271]

Property also helped make community. Privately owned pieces of land provided free people of color with space on which to build collective institutions in New Orleans. Marie Justine Sirnir recognized this utility when she bequeathed her Faubourg Marigny lot with specific instructions to be used for a school to educate free black orphans in the neighborhood. As New Orleans grew over the first half of the nineteenth century, free people of color played a key role in the city's development through investing in land, settling new neighborhoods, and predominating in the building trades. These enterprises brought free people together in various capacities, and it is through these social networks that the cooperation necessary to carry out Sirnir's bequest was forged. As Sirnir became integrated into the city's existing free black population, she capitalized on the new relationships she had formed and the land she owned to make a lasting contribution to her community.

[271] Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 86.

CHAPTER FIVE
Social Networks and Spatial Practices: Owning Land

I bequeath the lot of land and the buildings situated on Barracks street where I now make my residence to Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline natural children of Seraphine now deceased or to the surviving of them.

I wish and ordain that my land at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union streets be forever dedicated and employed for the establishment of a free school for the orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny.

- Testament of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow Bernard Couvent
November 12, 1832

Disembarking in New Orleans around 1804, Marie Justine Sirnir found a much smaller city than the one she had left in Saint-Domingue. At that time the Crescent City was roughly half the size of Cap Français on the eve of the Haitian Revolution.[1] A fellow refugee, unimpressed with what he observed in New Orleans, claimed that "[i]t deserves rather the name of a great straggling town, than of a city."[2] Yet, the strategically-placed port near the mouth of the Mississippi River was poised to undergo rapid economic, demographic, and geographic growth over the next decades. New Orleans had already begun to expand during its last ten years as a Spanish colony; a trend which only accelerated after the United States acquired the territory. By 1840, New Orleans was the nation's third largest city.[3]

As a resident of New Orleans from her arrival until her death in 1837, Marie Justine Sirnir witnessed the remarkable development of the city firsthand. She

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[1] Upton, *Another City*, 36; Geggus, "Major Port Towns," 108, Table 4.9; Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas*, 33.

[2] Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas*, 35.

[3] John Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries" in *Charting Louisiana: Five Hundred Years of Maps*, eds., Alfred Lemmon, John Magill, and Jason Wiese (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2003), 295-299; Aslakson, "Making Race," 34, 36, 39; Campbell Gibson, *Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990*, Population Division Working Paper No. 27 (Washington, DC: Population Division, United States Census Bureau, 1998), accessed January 18, 2014, http://www.census.gov/population /www/documentation /twps002 /tab07.txt; Upton, *Another City*, 20, Table 1. Upton includes areas of Philadelphia in his calculations that were not incorporated into the city until 1854. With these additions, Philadelphia outranked Baltimore and New Orleans in 1840. See Gibson's "Notes on Individual Places," http://www.census.gov/population /www /documentation /twps0027 /twps0027.html#notes.

participated in its growth as a landowner and made a lasting mark on New Orleans' urban landscape. However, her own role in her greatest legacy to the city was obscured as time passed. This chapter aims to reclaim due recognition for Sirnir by showing that the school she founded through the second of her two wills emerged logically from her perspicacity as an investor in land and her appreciative participation in networks that linked origins, land, work, institutions, and mutual aid among her new community of free people of color.

Geographers' approaches which stress "the dynamic, mutual construction of the spatial and social" are useful in interpreting Sirnir's eventual bequest.[4] Doreen Massey contends that space be understood "as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny." [5] At the same time that social relations constitute space, those relations are also constituted *by* space. Edward Soja refers to this reciprocal construction as the socio-spatial dialectic: "a mutually influential and formative relation between the social and spatial dimensions of human life, each shaping the other in similar ways." [6] Thus, the school on Sirnir's land was both a geographic space and a manifestation of social relations that became ever more expansive and entangled over the remainder of her life.

Upon arrival, Sirnir may have considered her relocation to New Orleans as temporary. She may have hoped to retrieve her son from "the heirs of François Moreau" and return with Celestin to Cap Français. After two years in the city, however, Sirnir took

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[4] Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson, "Situating Gender" in *A Companion to Feminist Geography*, eds. Lise Nelson and Joni Seager, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 26. See also Doreen Massey, "Introduction: Geography Matters" in *Geography Matters!: A Reader*, eds., Massey and John Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3, 6.

[5] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 9.

[6] Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

steps towards settling there by purchasing land. On May 13, 1806, she bought lot no. 253 from Bernard Marigny in his newly-created suburb, the Faubourg Marigny. Situated on the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets, the undeveloped parcel measured 60 by 120 French feet and cost $500. Sirnir provided no money upfront but promised to pay the entire amount within eighteen months. A mortgage remained on the lot until she completed the payment.[7] On June 18, Sirnir purchased a second piece of land "on which there are buildings" from Maria de los Santos Dias. This half lot, measuring 30 by 83 French feet, was located on Barracks Street between Royal and Condé in what today is known as the French Quarter. Sirnir paid the $550 purchase price in full at the time of the sale.[8] These two purchases, made within a month of one another, provided Sirnir with a place to live, a source of income, and a valuable investment.

Sirnir lived on Barracks Street for the next thirty-one years. Although it remained unimproved when she recorded her 1812 will, Sirnir eventually had buildings erected on the Faubourg Marigny lot and used it as a rental property. She also utilized her land to secure credit, most notably when she mortgaged both lots to purchase Bernard. At the time of her death, Sirnir still owned these two pieces of land. The value of her property had increased significantly over the three decades of her ownership. The appraisers assessed the Barracks Street lot, which contained "several buildings and improvements thereon, consisting principally of old cabins" at $3,000. The lot in the Faubourg Marigny

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[7] *Vente de terrain par Sr. Marigny à M.ie Jst.ne Sirnaire*, May 13, 1806, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, page 100, NARC. Grands Hommes or Greatmen Street is called Dauphine today and Union Street is now Touro Street. In English measure, the lot would be 63 feet 11 inches by 127 feet 10.5 inches. Bernard Marigny lifted the mortgage on May 18, 1808.

[8] *Vente de terrain par Dame Marie de los Santos Dias à Marie Justine Sirnir*, June 18, 1806, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 13, 59, NARC. Condé is now called Chartres Street. In English measure, the lot is roughly 32 by 88 feet.

"with buildings and improvements" was worth $12,000. Together, Sirnir's land made up 78.35 percent of her estate.[9]

With these purchases Sirnir joined a growing number of free black landowners in New Orleans. While free people of color owned land in the city during the colonial period, economic growth after the Louisiana Purchase offered increased opportunities for free black individuals to acquire property. The physical expansion of the city made more land available at affordable prices, allowing free people of color—native New Orleanians and Saint-Domingue refugees, alike—to settle new neighborhoods. At the same time, the growing population made owning rental properties a lucrative enterprise. Free black men and women took advantage of the booming real estate market as buyers and sellers but also as investors and speculators.[10] Some people, like Sirnir, owned their property for many years. Others purchased multiple lots in newly-planned suburbs in order to resell them for a profit. Although the first half of the nineteenth century saw several downturns, the overall economic situation during this period made land a sound investment. The fact that Sirnir's two pieces of land appreciated greatly over time, then, was not unusual. Indeed, a few individuals gained enormous wealth through owning land in the city.[11]

In addition to the economic advantages, Sirnir gained benefits through landholding that were perhaps less tangible but no less important. Her status as a land

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[9] Inventory for Estate of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Widow of Bernard Couvent, July 15, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, Series 1, pages 381-385, NARC.

[10] Louisiana law defined slaves as "real estate," too, so using the term to only refer to land is inaccurate. For the sake of word variation, I will use "real estate" in this chapter to refer to land. For more on slaves as real estate and the Louisiana courts' debates over this classification of human property see Judith Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 8, 25-26.

[11] Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*, 71, 99, 102, 118; Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 163; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 70; Lchance, "The Limits of Privilege," 66, 72; Sally Kittredge Evans, "Free Persons of Color," in *New Orleans Architecture, Volume IV: Creole Faubourgs*, eds. Roulhac Toledano, Sally Kittredge Evans, and Mary Louise Christovich (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1974), 35.

owner, like that of a slave owner, reinforced her status as a free woman. Owning these two lots also anchored Sirnir geographically and connected her socially to family and friends, neighbors and associates. On Barracks Street she made a home with her husband, Bernard, and the family she created with Seraphine and Seraphine's children. From there, Sirnir could easily walk to her Faubourg Marigny lot, which was only about five minutes away. Owning property in the Marigny extended Sirnir's ties to this neighborhood. A number of her associates and family members lived there, including her second testamentary executor, Henry Fletcher, and her husband's son, Bernard Couvent *fils*. Sirnir likely moved through the neighborhood often—crossing over Esplanade Avenue to check on her property or to visit friends and relatives.

In her 1832 will, Sirnir laid out specific instructions for each lot. Together, the testamentary plans for her land point up the important social relationships Sirnir established. The place where Sirnir made her home went to the surviving members of her family. She left the lot on Barracks Street to Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline, offering the siblings continued support after her death. Sirnir's last wishes for the Faubourg Marigny property, however, looked to support the broader community of which she had become a part. Sirnir dedicated the land at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets to be a free school for "the orphans of color" in the neighborhood.[12]

Sirnir's idea for the school and the subsequent establishment of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* in 1847 by a group of prominent free men of color was part of a wider movement of institution-building among Francophone free people of African descent in antebellum New Orleans. As slavery expanded in the Deep South, free blacks "encountered increasing discrimination and legal restrictions that would draw

[12] *Testament*, 1832.

them together and more clearly define their position in New Orleans society."[13] The creation of benevolent associations, schools, religious orders, and literary societies during the 1830s and 1840s formed one response to those restrictions.[14] The free men and women of color who came together to develop these organizations strengthened their identification with and reliance on one another in the process. As a school for free children of color operated by free people of color, *L'Institution Catholique* serves as a prime example of such collective strategies.

This chapter argues that Simir's philanthropic bequest and the creation of a school on her property grew out of her own sense of the needs of her adopted city and came to fruition as a culmination of the social relationships she formed in New Orleans. This perspective illuminates the ways in which land ownership facilitated the development of a community among free people of color. Utilizing their land to create homes, operate businesses, and form organizations, real estate offered free people of color a direct means to claim space for themselves in the city. Free black residents necessarily attained land in order to secure their individual well-being but also to protect and further develop common interests through collective institutions. At the same time, it was the daily operations of those individuals within New Orleans that brought people together and gave meaning to the spaces of the growing city. Movement through the city and face-to-face interactions with each other transformed urban spaces into *places* for free people of color.[15] As a result of this relationship between social networks and spatial practices, the

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[13] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 163.

[14] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 168; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 6-8, 40, 90, 105, 114, 123-125, 127-128, 131-133; Charles Kinzer, "The Tio Family: Four Generations of New Orleans Musicians, 1814-1933," (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1993), 77-79.

[15] Yi-Fu Tuan posits that what starts as "undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and assign it value." It is thus through experience, which Tuan defines as "the various modes through

city of New Orleans took shape, with a recognizable imprint left by free people of color.[16]

Challenging the Common Narrative

To argue that Sirnir's bequest was an idea that she developed out of ties to her community challenges the oft-repeated narrative of the founding of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents*. The source most commonly cited for the story of the school's establishment is Rodolphe Desdunes' 1911 publication, *Nos Hommes and Notre Histoire*, or more accurately, one of two translations of this work.[17] While Desdunes recognizes "the generosity of Mme. Couvent," in the creation of the institution, he reserves his most ebullient praise for the role Father Maenhaut played in the school's founding.[18] Desdunes writes, "Thanks to the inexhaustible efforts and to the unselfish interest of this priest, Mme. Couvent finally became known, her bequest was recovered and dedicated to its original purpose."[19]

According to Desdunes, Father Maenhaut's "inexhaustible efforts" occurred in two phases. The priest first served as "spiritual director" to Mme. Couvent during her

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which a person knows and constructs reality," that spaces take on meaning as places for individuals. Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6, 8.

[16] In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes, "...spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life." See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans., Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

[17] Desdunes describes the founding of the school in two sections of his book: one entitled "L'Institution Couvent" and the other entitled "Mme. Veuve Bernard Couvent." See Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 28-32, 139-146. Raoul Perez translated this latter section for publication in 1943. See Rodolphe Desdunes, "Mme. Bernard Couvent," trans. Raoul Pérez, *Negro History Bulletin*, VII (October, 1943), 7-9. Thirty years later, Sister Dorothea Olga McCants translated Desdunes' entire book. See Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, trans. and ed. Sister Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973). Together, these two translations form the basis of subsequent scholars' discussions of the founding of the school. For example, see Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 123-126 and Stephen Ochs, *A Black Patriot and a White Priest: André Cailloux and Claude Paschal Maistre in Civil War New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 53-54.

[18] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 139.

[19] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 142.

lifetime. As her advisor, Desdunes suggests that Maenhaut influenced Sirnir's decision to donate her land for educational purposes. Desdunes writes, "Aided, no doubt, by the advice of her spiritual director, [Couvent] allocated all of her property without hesitation to the unfortunate, to care for their minds, for the sole purpose of saving them from the dangers of ignorance."[20] Following Couvent's death, Father Maenhaut then acted as the spokesperson for her and the bequest. Desdunes claims that the priest's intervention was necessary because no one had ever heard of Mme. Couvent or her legacy before he shared the news. Without Maenhaut's efforts, "the population would have remained in complete ignorance with regards to Mme. Couvent, who she was, what she did, and how she lived."[21] Desdunes insinuates that without the priest's counsel Sirnir would not have bequeathed her Faubourg Marigny property for a school and that without his advocacy after her death both she and her bequest would have remained unknown.

It is true that Sirnir specifically placed the school under Maenhaut's supervision, and "in the case of his death or absence...under the supervision of his successors in office."[22] She very well may have considered the priest her "spiritual director." They almost certainly discussed the bequest before her death. Clearly Sirnir trusted Father Maenhaut to fulfill her last wishes regarding the school, and it is indeed possible that he also drummed up support for a school among prominent free men of color.

By overemphasizing Father Maenhaut's role, Desdunes shifts the conception of Sirnir's philanthropic bequest and the initiation of its execution outside of the community it was meant to serve. He comes close to denying Sirnir the ability to develop the idea for a school on her own and to make a decision about her property. He also obscures the

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[20] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 142.
[21] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 142-143.
[22] *Testament*, 1832.

social connections that existed among free people of color in New Orleans. According to Desdunes, the white priest served as the link between Sirnir and free men of color like "Barthélemy Rey, François Lacroix, Nelson Fouché, Emilien Brulé, Adolphe Duhart and several other patriots" who founded *L'Institution Catholique*.[23] This chapter questions this assumption, maintaining that it is far more conceivable that these men knew of Sirnir and the bequest at the time of her death. I argue that free black individuals close to Sirnir like Henry Fletcher and Bernard Couvent *fils*, rather than a white priest, functioned as mediators between her and the men who served on the school's first Board of Directors. With that aim, this chapter uncovers the social networks that led to the founding of *L'Institution Catholique*.

Shifting Social Networks

When Sirnir first arrived in New Orleans her social ties necessarily revolved around fellow Saint-Dominguans, particularly the Maurau family. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, relationships that originated in Saint-Domingue served as crucial sources of support for refugees when they relocated. In the beginning, the Mauraus were among the few, if not the only, people that Sirnir knew in the city. She may have lived near Jean Maurau and his wife or even with them before settling permanently on Barracks Street. If this was the case, however, Sirnir did not continue to reside in close proximity to the Mauraus after she purchased property in 1806.[24] While their residences remained within walking distance of one another, they were located on opposite ends of the French Quarter. This meant that Sirnir and the Mauraus likely did not see each other on a daily

[23] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 29.

[24] City directories and notary documents indicate that after Sirnir purchased her land in 1806 she did not live near the Mauraus.

basis. The distance between their homes spatially reflects a change that occurred in Simir's social networks.

In New Orleans Simir's social world both expanded and shifted from a Saint-Domingue refugee network centered around the Mauraus to one more focused on the larger group of free people of color. Some of her free black associates were refugees or the children of refugees but others were natives of New Orleans who could trace their family back to the Spanish and French colonial periods. Perhaps the most significant new relationship Simir formed with a native New Orleanian was with her husband Bernard Couvent. Despite his slave status, Bernard brought social capital to the union. He was part of a large network of enslaved (and formerly enslaved) individuals owned by the Ursulines. He worked as a carpenter, which brought him into contact with other free black craftsmen. He also had family members in New Orleans. How much she associated with Bernard's siblings or other extended family remains unclear, but Simir definitely knew his son, Bernard Couvent *fils* and his son's partner, Rosette Jacques. Simir and her husband served as the godparents for Bernard and Rosette's son in 1814.[25]

Because Bernard Couvent *fils* was a carpenter like his father, it may have been through him that Simir met Henry Fletcher, the free man of color whom she named as her testamentary executor in 1832. Born in New Orleans in the early 1790s, Fletcher and Couvent *fils* belonged to the same generation. Fletcher, too, worked as a carpenter, and the men likely served together in the First Battalion of Free Men of Color during the War

[25] *Bernard, negre lib de cette ville*, May 17, 1814, No. 184, page 25 in St. Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color, Volume 14, part 1, 1814-1815, AANO. Ten years later, the couple had a daughter, whom they named Anne Justine. Bernard Couvent was the child's godfather, but the godmother was a free woman of color named Adelaide Conty. It seems likely that the name "Justine," however, was chosen to honor the child's step-grandmother, Marie Justine Simir.

of 1812.[26] Fletcher's grandfather owned property on Barracks Street, one block away from Sirnir, and Fletcher may have grown up there.[27] As an adult, Fletcher settled in the Faubourg Marigny on Histoire Street, where he owned several lots and ran his carpentry business. His property was located only a few blocks from Sirnir's Marigny lot.[28] In addition to their close proximity and mutual acquaintance in Bernard Couvent *fils*, Henry Fletcher and Marie Justine Sirnir had at least one other significant point of connection. In 1827, Fletcher married Heloise Laville, a native of Cap Français.[29] It is possible that Sirnir knew Laville or her family in Le Cap and perhaps even introduced the couple. Even if this was not the case, the women's shared background could have provided Sirnir with another reason to trust Fletcher with her estate in 1832.

While Simir developed new relationships with free people of color in New Orleans, she maintained contact with the Maurau family. Jean Maurau endorsed the notes Sirnir used to pay for the purchase of slaves in 1810 and was present for the recording of the sale. She relied on Maurau for credit in the form of endorsed notes again in 1823.

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[26] *Bernardo Lambert negro libre*, April 9, 1797; *Enrrique Fletcher quarteron libre*, September 5, 1791, page 259, no. 1335, St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans, Baptism, 1786-1792, accessed December 7, 2013 http://www.archdiocese-no.org/archives/documents/SFPC/1786-1792/ St.%20Louis%20Cathedral, %20New%20Orleans,%20Baptism,%201786-1792.pdf; Marion John Bennett Pierson, comp., *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society, 1963), 10, 45; *Bernard, negre lib de cette ville*, May 17, 1814; 1822 City Directory.

[27] *Testament par Baptiste Maxent*, June 21, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 232, NARC.

[28] *Vente de portion de terrain par Bap.te Hardy h.d.c.l. à Henry Fletcher*, April 30, 1818, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 14A, part 1, act 288, NARC; Sale Marie T. Zabeth to Heloise Laville wife of Henry Fletcher, April 7, 1828, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 24, page 277, NARC; 1822 City Directory; 1823 City Directory; 1827 City Directory; 1830 City Directory; 1832 City Directory; 1838 City Directory; 1842 City Directory.

[29] *Marriage Contract Henry Fletcher with Heloise Laville*, October 19, 1827, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 21, page 308, NARC; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 17, 1826-1827 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2002), 153, 233.

When Sirnir married Bernard in 1812, Eugenie Maurau and Marie Emelie Maurau witnessed the ceremony.[30]

Changes in Sirnir's core social cohort are evident in her two wills. These testaments provide snapshots of the people most important to her in the moment the documents were created.In the twenty years that passed between recording the two testaments Sirnir gained new relationships while old ones grew distant or ended. The bequests Sirnir laid out in each will for her properties of most value—her land—suggest how her social networks evolved over time. When she recorded her first testament Sirnir left no specific instructions for the still-undeveloped Faubourg Marigny property, which she described simply as "a lot of land." This meant that Jean Maurau, named as her universal legatee, would have inherited the property if it was not needed to pay Sirnir's debts after her death. Sirnir divided the Barracks Street property between two beneficiaries. She left the house situated near the street along with a four-foot passageway in the courtyard to Marie Jullienne Besset, "natural daughter of Emelite Moreau *Veuve* Monet." In other words, this house went to François Maurau's granddaughter/Jean Maurau's grandniece. Sirnir left the other house at the rear of the courtyard that "I presently inhabit" to Seraphine. As the bequest was "in usufruct only," it did not give her full ownership.[31] Following Seraphine's death, possession would pass to Maurau, as Sirnir's universal legatee. Although this bequest would take care of Seraphine for the rest of her life, it ultimately kept the entire lot in the Maurau family. Privileging social ties that began in Le Cap and continued in New Orleans, this document

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[30] *Vente d'esclave par Mouro & C.e à Marie Justine Esther*, March 20, 1810; *M. Ant.e Duvernay Vente d'esclaves à M.ie Justine Sirnir femme Bernard Couvent*, October 20, 1823; *Bernardo, negro libre, con Ester negra libre*, October 27, 1812.

[31] *Testament*, 1812. Individuals granted usufruct have rights of ownership for only a designated period. See *Civil Code*, Book II, Title III, Chapter 1, Section 1, Art. 525, page79.

presents a very different scenario for the fate of Simir's property than that laid out in the 1832 testament which supported Seraphine's children and founded a school. Thus, while her first will looked back toward Saint-Domingue, her second will looked forward toward the future of the group she joined: free people of color in New Orleans.

Foundations of a Community

Simir formed relationships within a group whose gradual formation predated her arrival by several decades. Free people of color with diverse origins began to coalesce into a single group during the French colonial period. Enslaved Africans were first transported to New Orleans in 1719, and as early as 1722, a free black man appears in colonial records. Over the next forty-five years, the number of free people of color grew through manumissions, natural increase, and immigration. Exact numbers are difficult to determine because the French colonial regime rarely distinguished among people of African descent by status in records. Censuses made as the city transitioned from French to Spanish rule provide very low figures. A 1771 census listed only ninety-seven free black residents even though a militia roster from the previous year identified 299 free men of color living within the vicinity of New Orleans. Given such discrepancies, Shannon Dawdy argues that these numbers do not accurately reflect the free black population. She estimates that between 400 and 800 free black men, women, and children resided in New Orleans when the Spanish effectively took over in 1769.[32]

During the Spanish period the number of free people of color increased substantially. While some of the initial growth stemmed from the Spanish being more

[32] Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 178-181; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, Table 1.1, 18; Kimberly Hanger, "Origins of New Orleans's Free Creoles of Color," in *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 1, 4-5; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 129.

intent on racial and status labeling than the French, other factors allowed for the expansion of the free black population in New Orleans. According to Kimberly Hanger, the Spanish enacted policies that contributed to the increase in the number of free people of color. Colonial officials utilized both free black men and women "to fill middle-sector economic roles in society" and relied on men to provide defense for the colony. The Spanish also believed that offering enslaved Africans "legal channels" to freedom would decrease the threat of revolt. Viewed as the grantor and protector of freedom, the government would gain allies of emancipated slaves and their descendants.[33] A combination of methods added to the ranks of free people of color, including natural increase, immigration, and cases of enslaved individuals living as free. Manumission, however, remained the most important means by which the number of free people of color increased under Spanish rule.[34] At least 2,000 enslaved men, women, and children gained their freedom in New Orleans between 1769 and 1803.[35]

Laws introduced by the Spanish changed the manumission process, providing "new, more effective methods" by which slaves could gain their freedom.[36] The Code Noir governing French colonial Louisiana allowed manumissions but required masters to receive permission from the Superior Council in order to emancipate a slave. Dawdy suggests that this decree was routinely ignored by slave owners, as the few instances of

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[33] Hanger, "Origins," 6.

[34] Hanger, "Origins," 3; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 18, 20, 51.

[35] Hanger calculated a total of 1, 921 slaves manumitted between 1771 and 1803. Gould, however, gives the figure of 2,140 emancipated individuals between 1769 and 1803. Using Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's "Louisiana Free Database" a rough count places the number over 2,500 between 1763 (the official start of Spanish rule) to 1803 (the effective end of Spanish rule). See Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 21, Table 1.2; Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 155; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "Louisiana Free Database, 1720-1820," in *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy 1699-1860*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, CD-ROM (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), hereafter, Free Database. The calculations used throughout the rest of this section are based on Hanger.

[36] Hanger, "Origins," 7.

recorded manumissions cannot explain the number of free persons of color.[37] Under the Spanish, government permission to emancipate a slave was no longer necessary. Masters could free enslaved individuals through a notary act, will, or baptism. Some owners manumitted their slaves freely (*graciosa*), receiving no compensation. Most emancipations granted this way included no additional service, but some masters required continued labor for a set number of years.[38]

Spanish regulations also included provision for enslaved people to arrange their own manumissions. This procedure, known as *coartacion*, allowed slaves to purchase themselves from their masters at a price on which both parties agreed. If necessary, the price could be arbitrated by the court. Enslaved people could buy their own freedom or it could be purchased for them by a family member, friend, or associate. Both enslaved individuals and third party manumitters had the right to bring uncooperative masters before a tribunal, where appraisers determined a fair value for the slave in question. Upon receipt of the assessed amount, the tribunal bestowed freedom on the enslaved person.[39] Manumissions during the French period may have occurred in ways that circumvented the laws, but enslaved people did not have the right to initiate that process. With the rules implemented by the Spanish "slaves did not have to depend upon the generosity of masters to attain freedom; rather, slaves relied on their own efforts and on the aid of a favorable legal system."[40]

Enslaved individuals were quick to utilize *coartacion* to gain their freedom and that of family members. The number of self-purchase or third-party purchase

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[37] Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 181.
[38] Hanger, "Origins," 7-8, 12, 14, 16; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 26-27, 40; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 109.
[39] Hanger, "Origins," 7, 21; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 25, 49-50.
[40] Hanger, "Origins," 7.

emancipations rose over the period, reaching its height in the last decade of Spanish rule. By the early 1800s, over seventy-five percent of manumissions resulted from this method. In New Orleans' urban setting, enslaved men and women often had the opportunity to earn money through hiring out or selling goods. Although the prices paid for self-purchase or by a third party to secure emancipation increased during the Spanish period, over 1,100 people had successfully gained their freedom this way by 1803.[41]

Uncompensated, voluntary manumission by the owner also remained an important avenue of freedom during the Spanish period. Between 1771 and 1803, masters manumitted 798 enslaved men, women, and children *graciosa*. Emancipations made in testaments were common, but most were made while the master or mistress was living (*inter vivos*). A greater proportion of free black owners than whites freed their slaves this way. Owners manumitted slaves for a variety of reasons, commonly citing generic "good and loyal service." Kinship or other close relationships between master and slave often led to emancipation. As in Saint-Domingue, sexual relationships and family ties were not necessary for manumission *graciosa*, nor did such relationships guarantee freedom. However, white and free black men commonly manumitted the women with whom they had relations and the children that ensued. Voluntary, uncompensated manumission accounted for the emancipation of most freed persons described by terms indicating a mixed-racial background. Overall, more enslaved women and children received their freedom this way than men.[42]

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[41] Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*,100-101; Hanger, "Origins," 9, 17-19; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 20-21, Table 1.2, 27-28, 31, Table 1.6, 34, 43.

[42] Hanger, "Origins," 12-15; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 27, Table 1.4, 28, Figure 1.2, 32, 33, Table 1.8, 34-38; Spear, 114-115.

In fact, according to Hanger, twice as many women than men attained freedom through all legal methods of manumission during the Spanish period.[43] Various factors contributed to this differential. For one thing, the city's enslaved population contained more females than males. Women, who often served in domestic positions, had relationships with their owners, whether or not these were sexual. They also had better opportunities to earn money through trade in the port town, and on average, women's purchase prices were lower than those of men. In addition, masters were less willing to manumit highly valuable, skilled male slaves than lower-valued women and likely considered freed women less dangerous than freed men.[44] A 1795 census indicates that women made up sixty-eight percent of the city's free black population at that time.[45]

As the total number of free women of African descent increased, so did the number of children born to free mothers. Comparing the number of baptisms to funerals, Hanger determined that the population of free people grew naturally during the Spanish period. Free children of African descent baptized during these years were predominantly of mixed race, and slightly more male than female infants received baptismal rites.[46] One such child was Henry Fletcher. Born in New Orleans around August 13, 1791, "Enrrique" was baptized three weeks later on September 5. The baptism record describes Henry as a "*quarteron libre*" and "the legitimate child of Flecheur, native of England, resident of this city, and Maria Josefa, *grifa libre*." His godparents were Henry Bricou and Marie

[43] Hanger, "Origins," 9; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 28.
[44] Hanger, "Origins," 9-10, Figure 1.1; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 27-29; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 112.
[45] Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 159.
[46] Hanger, "Origins," 9; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 51-52, Table 1.9. Hanger's comparison of baptisms and funerals included the years 1787 to 1799.

Louise, both described as "*mulatos libres*."[47] Fletcher was one of eighty-seven free children of color baptized that year.[48]

Although Henry Fletcher's father was white, this had little to do with his freedom. Rather, Fletcher owed his free status to the hard work and financial resources of his grandfather, Baptiste Maxent. Described as a "mulatto" in several records, Maxent was born into slavery around 1748. He belonged to Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent, a wealthy French colonist.[49] Baptiste received his freedom from St. Maxent, although the exact date is unclear. He had two daughters with Marie Therese, another slave owned by St. Maxent. On June 4, 1782, Baptiste purchased the freedom of his nine-year-old daughter, Marie Joseph, from St. Maxent's wife for 400 *pesos*. Through this third-party purchase, Henry's mother gained her freedom.[50] In 1787 Baptiste bought the freedom of Marie Therese for 1,000 pesos.[51] Baptiste Maxent utilized *coartacíon* to free his family and allowed free status to be passed on to his grandson. Thus, Fletcher, who could trace his maternal line in New Orleans back to the French period, was of the first generation in his family to be born free.

Immigration further added to the port's free black population. Sacramental records indicate that free people of color moved to New Orleans from other parts of Spanish America. For example, Marie Jeanne Prudhome and her daughter Margarita

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[47] *Enrrique Fletcher, quarteron libre*, September 5, 1791. Although Fletcher is described as the legitimate child of "Flecheur" and "Maria Josepha," a marriage record for his parents has not been located.

[48] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 52, Table 1.9.

[49] Under both the French and the Spanish, St. Maxent held powerful positions in the military and government, controlled the fur trade, and owned extensive property, including land and slaves. For a brief biography of St. Maxent see James Julian Coleman, Jr., *Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent: The Spanish-Frenchman of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing House, 1968).

[50] *Testament par Baptiste Maxent*, June 21, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 232, NARC; Free Database, entry no. 812. Baptiste and Marie Therese's other daughter, Modeste was also free, but whether she was born after her mother's manumission or if she, too, was emancipated through the financial resources of her father remains unknown.

[51] Free Database, entry no. 1215.

Castenedo arrived from Cuba, while Antonio Joseph Bogarin came from Venezuela.[52] Ties with French Caribbean colonies also brought free black émigrés to the city during the Spanish period. Henry Fletcher's godfather, Henry Bricou, was a native of Cap Français. It is unclear when he migrated to Louisiana, but given the date of Fletcher's baptism, Bricou's arrival predated the outbreak of insurrection in Saint-Domingue.[53]

By 1805, the number of free people of color in New Orleans had reached 1,566, about a fifth of the city's total population. If Dawdy's estimates of the late French period are correct, then at the very least, the free black population doubled under Spanish rule. Manumissions, accounted for most of this growth, but an increasing number of free people of color were free-born children like Henry Fletcher. Hanger argues that this demographic expansion and particularly the increase in the number of creoles among the free black population allowed for "the social organization needed to create libre cohesiveness and identity." Building on advances made under French rule, free people of color used property ownership, kinship ties, and membership in "corporate entities like the militia and church" to sustain and enhance their lives and those of their children and grandchildren over the course of the Spanish period.[54]

Free men and women of color utilized earnings to purchase family members and some people were even able to accrue enough capital to invest in property. Owning

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[52] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 51. Margarita Castenedo married Charles Decoudreau, a free black carpenter and native New Orleanian in 1798. The couple had seven children. A daughter named Josephine married Paul Trevigne, *pere*, and a son, Joseph, was a close associate of Henry Fletcher's. Joseph Decoudreau, Paul Trevigne, *pere*, and Fletcher were all carpenters. These men's connections will be discussed in more detail below. For more on the Decoudreau family see Pierre Force, "The House on Bayou Road: Atlantic Creole Networks in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 100, no. 1 (June 2013): 21-45.

[53] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 51; Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 7, 1800-1803 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1992), 39, 117.

[54] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, quotes on 17, 18, Table 1.1, 22, Table 1.3,

property provided recently manumitted slaves a way to secure their freedom and that of future generations. Free people of color owned urban lots and rural lands, slaves, and personal belongings such as silverware and jewelry. Although their level of wealth fell far short of that of free people of color in Saint-Domingue, a few accumulated sizeable estates. The economic activities of free blacks in Spanish New Orleans created a base on which their descendants could continue to build in the early republican and antebellum periods.[55]

Often capital and property accumulated slowly over several generations. Inheritance was important for gaining and maintaining assets. Both French and Spanish legal codes gave free black people the same rights as whites to own property, make contracts, and sue in court. The Spanish, however, also allowed enslaved and free people of African descent to receive property as a donation or inheritance from whites and free blacks. Free black parents passed on property to their children. If no heirs existed, testators relied on other relationships to determine their beneficiaries, such as god-parenthood or friendship. Ties to whites, whether based on kinship or patronage, also aided property acquisition, particularly for women.[56] In his will, French native Charles Vivant left money and slaves to Louise Cheval and the eight children they had together. In addition to specific bequests, Vivant's children were to share one-half of his estate.[57] This provided Cheval and her children with resources which they could use to start a business, invest in more property, or sell for a profit. Yet, Hanger points out, "Even with the advantage of inheritance...privileged free people of color had to employ all of their

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[55] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 55-56, 70; Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 152, 157.

[56] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 56, 73-74, 79-81; Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 158-159.

[57] *Testamento de Carlos Vivant*, May 31, 1796 in Acts of F. Broutin, Volume 40, page 177, NARC. Vivant owned extensive land outside of New Orleans and one-quarter interest in a business. The other half of his estate was to be divided between his mother and two sisters in France.

energy, skills, and business acumen in order to maintain and increase their property holdings."[58]

The generation and preservation of capital and property required hard work. Most free men and women of color labored in some capacity to earn income, although those who owned slaves had the added benefit of an unpaid labor source. A census made in 1795 indicates the types of occupations filled by free black heads of households. Men were often skilled artisans, including shoemakers, tailors, silversmiths, and gunsmiths. By far, the most common occupation was that of carpenter, but free men of color also worked as joiners, masons, and coopers.[59] Men often learned these types of skilled jobs as slaves then passed their knowledge on to their sons, nephews, and grandsons. It seems likely that Henry Fletcher learned carpentry from his grandfather, who may have received training when he was a slave.[60] If free black men figured prominently in the building trades, free women of color overwhelmingly worked in the "commerce sector," as retailers, traders, and shopkeepers. They also frequently served in domestic occupations, notably as seamstresses and laundresses. The census also lists one midwife, one mattress maker, and two tavern keepers.[61] Well into the nineteenth century, free men and women of color continued to predominate in construction and retail businesses, respectively.

Along with occupations, the 1795 census offers a partial view of property holdings.[62] Together, free people of color owned twenty-one percent of the city's total land and slaves. Over a fifth of the roughly 800 free black men and women listed in the

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[58] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 87.
[59] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 55-56, 57-59, Table 2.2, 62.
[60] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 58, 69. The 1822 City Directory lists Baptiste Maxent as a carpenter.
[61] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 57-60, Table 2.2, 63.
[62] The 1795 Census only includes data for three of four quarters of the city. The missing fourth quarter contained the second largest proportion of free people of color. See Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 57, 59, 194n 9.

census owned houses, while fifteen percent owned slaves. White men controlled the majority of New Orleans' property, owning sixty-three percent of all land and slaves. Compared to white women, however, free people of color possessed a higher percentage of the total property owned in New Orleans. A clear disparity in property ownership existed between free black men and women. Free women of color owned sixteen percent of land and slaves in the city, whereas free men of color held only five percent. Free black women were not only more likely to own slaves and houses than their male counterparts but they owned more of both. As with manumissions, demographic and economic factors provided women with advantages over men.[63]

Along with property ownership, free women and men of color gained influence and visibility through two institutions controlled by whites: the Catholic Church and colonial militias. Both men and women utilized the Church to cement social and familial ties, but women, in particular, formed a discernible presence in New Orleans' Catholic congregation. Emily Clark and Virginia Gould argue that African women and their descendants played an essential role in both supporting the church and introducing enslaved women to Catholicism. During the Spanish period, particularly after 1760, women of African descent became the leading group to serve as godparents for enslaved baptisands. While black men also participated in these ceremonies, women more often filled this role and continued to do so into the nineteenth century.[64]

Using the sacramental records, Clark and Gould trace a progression of "religious creolization that resulted in both the feminization and the Africanization of New

[63] Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 160-163.
[64] Emily Clark and Virginia Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *William and Mary Quarterly,* vol. 59, no. 2 (April 2002): 413, 438.

Orleans's Catholic church."[65] The process began with enslaved African women during the French colonial period, whose importation converged with the arrival of the Ursuline nuns. At first, enslaved women made up the greater part of baptisands. These women then passed on religious instruction to the next generation of men and women. Eventually, women of African descent took on more responsibility by serving as godparents. The process by which black women made the Catholic Church their own reached its final stage in the antebellum period with the founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family by Henriette Delille. Generations of women, including Delille's own maternal ancestors, laid the groundwork for this last phase in which free black women took on formal leadership roles in the Church.[66]

Between 1836 and 1852, Delille and her associates, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, developed the Sisters of the Holy Family from a lay confraternity into a full-fledged religious order of free women of color. The order administered a school and eventually an orphanage in the Faubourg Tremé.[67] Established around the same time as *L'Institution Catholique*, the Sisters of the Holy Family was another prominent example of free black institution-building. The order's founding, much like that of the Catholic Institution, represented cooperation among New Orleanians and Saint-Dominguans. While Delille came from a long line of African-descended women in New Orleans, her

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[65] Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 412.

[66] Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 412-413.

[67] Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 443-447; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 129-131; Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road*, 99-100. In 1836, Delille Gaudin, Charles and several other women formed a confraternity, the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1842, these women gained authorization from Bishop Antoine Blanc to form a religious order. Ten years later, Delille, Gaudin, and Charles took their vows in St. Augustine's Church in the Faubourg Tremé. The religious order still exists today. For more on Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family see Virginia Gould, "Henriette Delille, Free Women of Color, and Catholicism in Antebellum New Orleans, 1727-1852" in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, eds., Darlene Clark Hine and David Barry Gaspar (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 271-285 and Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, eds., Virginia Gould and Charles Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

associate Juliette Gaudin was born in Cuba to Saint-Domingue refugees.[68] An incorporated association formed to provide support and protection for the order in 1847. Several of the founding board members of the *Association de la Sainte Famille* also served on the inaugural board for the Catholic Institution, including François Lacroix, Etienne Cordeviolle, Chazal Thomas, and Jean Pierre Lana.[69]

In addition to formal leadership roles, free women of color assiduously carved space for themselves within New Orleans' Catholic Church through church attendance. Visitors to the city often commented on the large number of women of color in the congregation. In 1805 Anglo-American John Watson urged fellow travelers to "[v]isit the churches when you will and the chief audience is formed of mulatresses and negresses."[70] Fourteen years later, Benjamin Latrobe visited St. Louis Cathedral on Good Friday where "[t]he people, of whom ¾ at least were colored, & of those a very large majority were women" attended the service."[71] In 1834, Latrobe's son, John, also noticed that the Cathedral's "aisles were filled, mostly with mulatto and negro women" during Mass.[72] Given the large number of free women of color who arrived in New Orleans from Saint-Domingue after 1803, it is fair to say that they added to this highly visible "colored" congregation.

Free women of color also shaped the Church in more profound ways, working "to expand the embrace of the church" to include people of African descent. In doing so, they reinforced kinship, friendship, and spiritual ties. Priests recognized the significance of

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[68] Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road*, 99.

[69] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 132-133; Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road*, 99-100.

[70] Quoted in Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 437.

[71] Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, 122.

[72] Samuel Wilson, Jr., ed., *Southern Travels: Journal of J. H. Latrobe, 1834* (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection, 1986), 80.

these women's active support—not just to black people in the name of Catholicism but to sustaining the institution through the antebellum period. Free and enslaved women found empowerment through their involvement with the Catholic Church and utilized their leadership positions to substantially influence "the growth of an Afro-Catholic community" in New Orleans.[73]

Just as the Church served as a social space for women of color, the militia offered a space for free black men. Indeed, for many, the militia was a significant aspect of their experience of freedom. Although the French periodically employed enslaved and free black men as soldiers, the institution expanded greatly under Spanish rule. The Spanish government utilized free men of color militias throughout colonial America. Providing manpower to defend its territories, particularly in the Caribbean was one rationale for Spanish policies that encouraged the growth of the free black population. In a few instances, enslaved men earned their freedom by serving in a military capacity. New Orleans' free black militia members participated in the major military campaigns of the Spanish period, including those against the British during the American Revolution. Hanger argues that the free black militia "played a vital role in defending New Orleans and in promoting a sense of corporate identity among the city's libre population."[74]

During the French colonial era, military service became one avenue to freedom for enslaved men. Lacking troops, French authorities turned to slaves for military support against the Natchez and Chickasaw in the 1730s. These men received their freedom, and by 1739, French forces included a free black militia company of fifty men. This militia still existed when the Spanish took over three decades later. In 1769, thirty-four men

[73] Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 410, 437, 446-448.
[74] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 48, quote on 109, 110, 112-113, 117-118.

signed an oath of allegiance to Spain as "La Compagnie des Mulâtres et Nègres Libres de cette colonie de la Louisianne."[75]

Military service under the French not only provided freedom to a group of enslaved men, it also bestowed a sense of honor and prestige on free black militia members. This continued to be the case for participants in the militia organized by Spanish authorities, who required all healthy free black men to join. The Spanish divided the New Orleans' free black militia by phenotype into the pardo (light/mixed-race) and moreno (dark/black) units. Militia members in both divisions could advance in the ranks, serving as commissioned and non-commissioned officers. These men received higher wages and retirement funds and were often exempted from paying taxes and other fees. Although compulsory, militia duty offered a means of upward mobility to free men of African descent in Spanish New Orleans.[76]

The companies saw their first action under Governor Gálvez against the British in 1779-1781, where individual soldiers earned silver medals and promotions for their distinguished service. Following the conclusion of these campaigns, government authorities employed the free black militia in a variety of tasks. Militia units helped rebuild the levees during times of flooding. They were called upon to extinguish the fire that set the city ablaze in 1788. In addition to aiding in emergencies, free black soldiers also served on night patrols and were routinely enlisted to capture runaway slaves. Militia

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[75] Roland McConnell, *Negro Troops of Antebellum Louisiana: A History of the Battalion of Free Men of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1968); Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 117-118; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition,* 16; Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 179; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 103.

[76] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition,* 16; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 112-113; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 16. The Spanish originated the policy that divided free men of color into units based on phenotype in Cuba. Because Louisiana fell under Cuban jurisdiction, Spanish administrators applied it in New Orleans. The city also had a large enough population of free black men that it was possible to divide them into groups. Hanger points out, however, that such divisions "did not materially affect free black soldiers," as each group "received equal pay, provisions, and treatment." See Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 112.

units drilled in the central Place d'Armes (Jackson Square) and donned their uniforms to march in annual feast day parades.[77]

When Governor Carondelet came to power in 1791 the free black militia played a key role in his charge to build up the defenses of New Orleans. He expanded the militia by creating additional units and promoting members at a rapid rate. Fearing an attack by the French, Carondelet positioned free black companies at each of the new fortifications constructed around the city and at a fort near the mouth of the river. The predicted assault from France did not occur, but free black troops were sent to Florida in the summer of 1800 to take back a fort captured by an American expedition. By 1801, the number of militia members of African descent had grown from 89 in 1779 to 469. The pardo division consisted of 362 members in four companies under the command of Captain François Dorville. The moreno unit, made up of 134 members, was divided into two companies overseen by Captain Noel Carrière. Both commanding officers were free men of African descent.[78]

Participation in the free black militia encouraged a collective identity among its members, and social networks among militiamen are clearly traceable through sacramental and notary records. Officers like Dorville and Carrière not only served as leaders within the militia but outside of it as well. Militia members often loaned each other money and named fellow soldiers as beneficiaries and testamentary executors in their wills. Officers also served as witnesses for each other's weddings and godfathers for

[77] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 109, 113, 119-125; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 17-24; Aslakson, "Making Race," 53.

[78] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 113, 123-125; McConnell, *Negro Troops,* 24-26, 29-30; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 82.

one another's children.[79] In her careful analysis of Catholic marriage records, Emily Clark determined that Noel Carrière led the way for militia officers standing as witnesses at free black weddings. Between 1790 and his death in 1804, Carrière witnessed thirty marriage ceremonies. Dorville trailed the moreno captain, attending twenty weddings as an official witness. Despite being divided into separate regiments by phenotype, evidence suggests that pardo and moreno militia members interacted socially. Clark identifies twelve weddings that Carièrre witnessed for pardo grooms "who were categorized as his racial superiors by colonial officials." One of these grooms was Henry Bricou, Henry Fletcher's godfather. Bricou served under Dorville in the pardo company, but Carrière was the most decorated officer at the ceremony.[80]

Often the marriages witnessed by Carrière and other officers linked militia members and their families together. Militia-affiliated grooms frequently married the sisters or daughters of fellow soldiers. Henry Bricou married Euphrosina Dupart, the sister of Charles Dupart *fils*, who served with him in the pardo unit. Dupart *fils* also stood as godfather for the couple's daughter Henrietta in 1803.[81] Militia membership was, indeed, a family affair with brothers and cousins serving together. Vincent Populus and his brother Maurice, for example, were both officers in the pardo unit. Multiple generations of the same family participated when sons, nephews, and even grandsons followed their predecessors' into active duty. Noel Carrière's son, also named Noel, had reached the rank of second lieutenant in the moreno unit by 1801.[82]

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[79] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 125-131.

[80] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 76, 79, quote on 82; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 7:39, 117.

[81] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 128-129; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 83; General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain, AGI PC 160A, folios 348, 350, May 1, 1801 on microfilm at HNOC; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 7:39, 117 and 8: 41.

[82] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 130; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 83, 90.

Property ownership and skilled occupations complemented militia service in promoting the social standing of individual free men of color. Free black militia members, especially those in officer positions, were often artisans who owned land and slaves. According to the 1795 census, Captain Carrière was a cooper who owned five slaves and property on Dumaine Street. The Populus brothers worked as shoemakers and both owned slaves and lots on Bourbon Street. Militia officers were well-represented in the building trades. Grenadier Captain Charles Brulé, Louis Dufiliau, and Paul Cheval, were all carpenters. Lieutenant Vincent Cupidon was a mason and Rafael Bernabé worked as a joiner.[83] The common experiences of militia duty, property ownership, and work in skilled occupations brought together a group of free black artisan-soldiers in New Orleans. These men strengthened their ties to one another through marriage and godparenting and formed an influential segment of the free black population in Spanish New Orleans.[84]

Anglo-American officials taking charge of Louisiana in December 1803 encountered a free black population "with unusual rights and powers but also with a peculiar assertiveness and self-confidence."[85] Militia members especially exemplified these attributes, and they worked quickly to maintain their positions as "citizen-soldiers" under the new regime. Although the companies joined in the official transfer ceremonies in December 1803, the Louisiana Purchase left the militia's fate uncertain. Members of the free black militia pressed for recognition by the United States government shortly

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[83] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 61, 69, 85, 128-130, 197n45; Vieux Carré Survey, accessed February 23, 2014, http://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property_info.php?lot=18607; http://www.hnoc.org/vcs /property _info .php?lot=18612; http://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property_info.php?lot=18797. In 1797 Bernabé was hired to construct all of the wood work for the Cabildo building which housed the Spanish government.

[84] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 134.

[85] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 207.

after it took control of the territory. In January 1804, a group of militiamen formally requested that Governor Claiborne retain their services in "An Address from the Free People of Color."[86]

Militia members offered their loyalty to the United States in their statement, promising to serve "with fidelity and zeal" as a "Corps of Volunteers agreeable to any arrangement which may be thought expedient." They presented themselves as capable soldiers, citing their excellent service under the Spanish. As proof of their desire to defend Louisiana, the authors explained that as "natives of the Province" their "dearest Interests are connected with its welfare." Most importantly, they referred to themselves as "free citizens of Louisiana," and, as such, they fully expected their "personal and political freedom" to be "assured to [them] for ever" by the "American Republic." Fifty-five individuals signed the Address, including the Populous brothers, Henry Fletcher's godfather, Henry Bricou, and Jean Louis Dolliole, a fellow carpenter and close associate of Fletcher.[87]

Governor Claiborne immediately recognized that the free black militia's existence created a delicate situation. Prior to receiving the Address, Claiborne had "reflected with much anxiety" on what to do about "this particular Corps."[88] He only had to look to Saint-Domingue to see the potential danger of armed free men of color joining forces

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[86] Aslakson, "Making Race," 156, 171; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 137, 163; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 32-33, 35; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 11, 29-30. During its very brief repossession of Louisiana, the French government recommissioned the free black militia.

[87] "Address from the Free People of Color," January 1804 in Clarence Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. IX, *The Territory of Orleans, 1803-1812* (Washington: 1940), 174-175; all quotes on 174.

[88] William Claiborne to James Madison, December 27, 1803 in Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Book*, 1:314.

with the enslaved population against whites.[89] In an attempt to appease the militia members, Claiborne responded to their Address with the assurance "that under the protection of the United States, their Liberty, Property and Religion were safe." The militia would remain intact while he awaited orders from Washington.[90]

In February, Claiborne received instructions from Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to retain the free black militia with the aim "to diminish" it over time, "if it can be done without giving offense."[91] Dearborn suggested that the Governor present the companies with a flag, which Claiborne did in June. This did not please white residents, who felt the free black militia received preferential treatment. Claiborne, however, also replaced the militia's commanding free black officers with white men that same month. Militia members protested the removal of their officers, but Claiborne managed to convince them to accept the new commanders. Dearborn's plan to gradually phase the free black militia out of existence abruptly ended in October 1804 with the convening of the first territorial legislature. Militia laws passed by legislators over the next six years excluded provisions for the commission of free black militia units despite Claiborne's recommendations to the contrary.[92]

The arrival of large numbers of Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba in 1809 and 1810 only further strengthened the danger posed by armed free men of color in the minds of many whites. As discussed in Chapter Three, laws restricted the entrance of Saint-

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[89] Writing to James Madison in late December 1803, Claiborne explained that "[t]o re-commission them might be considered as an outrage on the feelings of a part of the Nation, and as opposed to those principles of Policy which the Safety of the Southern States has necessarily established." Yet, "[t]o disband them would be to raise an armed enemy in the very heart of the Country." See Rowland, *Official Letter Book*, 1:314.

[90] William Claiborne to James Madison, January 17, 1804 in Rowland, *Official Letter Book*, 1: 339-340.

[91] Henry Dearborn to William Claiborne, February 20, 1804 in Rowland, *Official Letter Book*, 1:54.

[92] Henry Dearborn to William Claiborne, February 20, 1804; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 31-33, 48; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 38-41, 45; Aslakson, "Making Race," 178-180; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 87.

Dominguan free black men for fear of their potential revolutionary agenda. Such bans were difficult to enforce, however. Free men of color did enter from Cuba, although not to the extent of their female counterparts. Even so, the arrival of refugees from Cuba heightened white residents' fear of collusion among free and enslaved people of African descent, which together made up almost two-thirds of the city's total population in 1810.[93]

When a large slave insurrection broke out in nearby St. John's Parish on January 8, 1811 it seemed that "the horrors of St. Domingo" had come to pass in territorial Louisiana.[94] Former free black militia members in New Orleans, however, quickly seized the opportunity to prove their loyalty and capability as soldiers. Because the current militia forces were woefully inadequate, Claiborne sent federal troops to quell the rebellion. Free black militia members offered their services to these troops, and one company was accepted for muster. Following the suppression of the uprising, Claiborne praised the soldiers' conduct and urged legislators to strengthen the defense of the territory through a new militia law that included free black units.[95]

The need for a strong, organized militia took on renewed urgency when the United States went to war with Great Britain in June 1812. During the summer Louisiana's now-state legislature rewrote the militia law. The bill contained an act that allowed Claiborne to create a militia corps of free men of color. The law stipulated that militia members were to be " 'chosen from among the Creoles' who not only paid a state tax but who for two years previous had been the owners or sons of owners of landed

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[93] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 42, 46. In 1810, the city contained 17,242 people—6,331 whites, 4,950 free people of color, and 5,961 enslaved people. See Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 206, Table 1.

[94] Quoted in Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 46.

[95] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 48-50; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 46, 48.

property worth at least $300.00."[96] The specification that only "Creoles" could participate effectively barred Saint-Dominguans from service. Because many former militia officers had accumulated property during the Spanish period, the tax and property ownership clause encouraged these men and their progeny to join. Moreover, the property requirement clearly linked property ownership, legitimacy, and citizenship in the territory.[97] Claiborne immediately began commissioning officers for the newly created Battalion of Chosen Men of Color. The Battalion was overseen, however, by a white commander.[98]

As the theatre of conflict in the War of 1812 shifted to the Gulf region, restrictions of birthplace and property ownership for free black militia membership fell away. General Andrew Jackson called upon Claiborne to supplement federal forces against an anticipated attack by the British with Louisiana militiamen.[99] Jackson specifically asked "the Free Coloured Inhabitants of Louisiana" for help in a published address. Referring to free men of color as "Americans" and "sons of freedom," Jackson called upon them to defend their families and homes by "participating in the glorious struggle for national rights in which our country is engaged." The address indicated that the free black companies would serve in a separate battalion from whites. A white commissioned officer would oversee the battalion, but non-commissioned officers would

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[96] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 50-53, quote on 53; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 48. Louisiana was admitted as a state on April 8, 1812.

[97] Louisiana's 1812 Constitution tied voting rights to paying a state tax or purchasing land from the federal government, although the right to vote was restricted to white male citizens. For the Louisiana Constitution see *Civil Code*, xxii-xxxii.

[98] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 166-167; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 53.

[99] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 56, 58-63; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 48, 51-53.

be drawn from the free men of color volunteers. All soldiers, whether white or of African descent, would receive equal pay, namely $124 and 160 acres of land.[100]

Ultimately, Jackson's appeal resulted in the muster of two battalions of free men of color into the United States Army. The First Battalion of Free Men of Color, under the command of Major Pierre Lacoste, a white merchant, consisted of six companies and a total of 353 men. The highest-ranking free black officer was Second Lieutenant Vincent Populus. His brother, Maurice, served as captain of one company. Noel Carrière *fils*, another familiar name from the Spanish militia days, served as Second Lieutenant. Several of the men who signed the 1804 petition to Claiborne joined, like Jean Louis Dolliole and Captain Jean Ternoir. Henry Fletcher served under Ternoir at the rank of corporal, along with his cousin, Jean Baptiste Pechon. Bernard Couvent's son likely served, too. If so, he was listed under the name "Sanon Bernard."[101]

The Second Battalion of Free men of Color enlisted 256 men organized into four companies. While New Orleans natives made up the First Battalion, the solders in the Second Battalion were all Saint-Domingue refugees. Despite being in the territory illegally, the call to arms provided free men of color émigrés a way to prove their loyalty to the United States. Joseph Savary, who had served in the French republican army during the Haitian Revolution, recruited the Second Battalion members. General Jackson commissioned Savary as Second Major to serve under the Battalion commander.[102] Other Second Battalion members included Quartermaster Louis Séjour, the father of writer

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[100] John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Volume 2 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1926), 58-59.

[101] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 68; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition* , 54-55; Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 10, 22, 38, 45, 92, 96, 115. In Simir's 1832 will, Bernard Couvent, *fils*, is referred to as "Sanon Bernard Couvent."

[102] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 71; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 55-56.

Victor Séjour, and "Marin Breau," the brother of Genevieve Fortunat, who received his inheritance via Rosalie Chesneau (Chapter Three).[103]

Members of the First and Second Battalion of Free Men of Color fought bravely against the British in late 1814 and early 1815. The conflict culminated on January 8, 1815 at the decisive Battle of New Orleans. Following the conflict, Jackson praised the free black soldiers for their "courage and perseverance in the performance of their duty." Louisiana's General Assembly also commended the First and Second Battalions, along with free women of color who nursed the wounded, in a joint resolution passed in February.[104]

In March 1815 the battalions were dismissed from service as federal troops and returned to Louisiana as part of the state militia. These units remained in existence until 1834, but participation declined over the two decades after the Battle of New Orleans. Several factors led to the end of the free black militia. Interest on the part of free men of color waned over time, in part because militia leaders grew older and began to pass away. Their increasing indifference to militia service corresponded with a general apathy towards state militias that developed across the nation following the War of 1812. The diminishing interest on the part of free men of color combined with growing white opposition to the free black militia in the 1830s, which saw a renewed fear of slave rebellions. When the state legislature revamped the militia law in 1834 it restricted service to white citizens. This action officially terminated the free black militia.[105]

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[103] Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 17, 107; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 71, 105; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 90. For information on Victor Séjour see Cossé Bell, 94-98; Michel Fabre, "New Orleans Creole Expatriots in France: Romance and Reality," in Kein, *Creole*, 184-187; M. Lynn Weiss, "Introduction" in *The Jew of Seville*, Victor Séjour, trans., Norman Shapiro (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xv-xx.

[104] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 66, 73, 85, 89, 91, 93.

[105] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 97, 100-104; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 167.

In addition to the loss of members over time, other issues discouraged free men of color veterans from continuing to muster their militia units. The fact that their exemplary service failed to translate into political rights and full citizenship for free men of color caused disappointment among the battalion members. As exhibited by their address to Claiborne in 1804, free men of color understood their military service for the Spanish as indicative of their citizenship and a justification for their inclusion in the body politic of the United States as "free citizens of Louisiana." The fifty-five men who signed the address watched as first the territorial regulations and then the 1812 state constitution restricted citizenship to white male property owners. When the United States needed soldiers to defend New Orleans from the British, however, the government did not hesitate to call upon free men of color to serve. The chance to prove their worth as soldiers and loyalty to the new government spurred free black men's enthusiasm for enlisting in 1814. Although the men did receive equal pay and pensions for their service, they remained barred from participation in the political system.[106] Thus, continued muster during peacetime came to be viewed as "closer to exploitation than honor."[107]

With peace in the postwar period came prosperity and this further inspired indifference towards militia duty. New Orleans experienced a veritable economic boom after the war, fueled by technological advances in steam power and sugar refining techniques, westward expansion, and "an unrelenting demand for slaves."[108] This growth increased opportunities for free men of color to manage successful businesses and invest

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[106] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 36, 97, 100, 108-111; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 64; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 6-7.

[107] Aslakson, "Making Race," 184. The bitterness and sense of betrayal felt by free black militia members was captured in a poem entitled, "The Campaign of 1814-15." The piece was written by Hippolyte Castra (possibly a pseudonym), who, according to Rodolphe Desdunes, was a free black veteran of the Battle of New Orleans. For more on poem see Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 6-11; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 106-108; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 89-90.

[108] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 100-101; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 176, 179-180, 182-183, quote on 188.

in real estate. Those in the buildings trades were particularly poised to profit from the physical development of the city. Militia service, however, placed an economic burden on its members, especially the rank and file because it took them away from their regular occupations. Roland McConnell argues that "[f]or the colored veterans, most of whom were already established as skilled craftsmen or small businessmen, this economic upsurge brought unprecedented opportunities for profitable employment and rendered militia duty all the more irksome."[109]

The 1822 City Directory indicates the types of occupations held by members of the First and Second Battalion. The most common trades involved woodwork and construction. Veterans worked as cabinetmakers, coopers, masons, and carpenters. The directory listed Jean Louis Dolliole as a cabinetmaker and his brother, Orderly Sergeant Joseph Dolliole as a carpenter. Other carpenters included Corporal Henry Fletcher, Quartermaster Joseph Cabaret and Privates Ursin Guesnon and Noel Bonrepaux. Vincent Cupidon was a mason and First Lieutenant Noel Carrière *fils* was a cooper like his father. Battalion members also labored as tailors and cobblers. Sergeant Joseph Camps worked as a tailor, while Second Major Vincent Populus and his brother First Lieutenant Maurice Populus made shoes. Other veterans worked in occupations outside of the crafts. Louis Ferrand *fils*, Sergeant Major in the Second Battalion, owned a grocery business. The directory listed François Escoffier as a teacher and Second Lieutenant Charles Vivant as an accountant.[110] These types of skilled jobs allowed battalion members to take

[109] McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 101.

[110] 1822 City Directory; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 101; Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 20, 21, 22, 31, 38, 45, 54, 96, 121. The 1822 City Directory was the first directory published after the war ended in 1815.

advantage of the rapid development of New Orleans to earn a living and, for many, to indeed prosper.

Although their interest in maintaining a free black militia faded, the significance of their military service did not wane. As a shared experience and a proud tradition, particularly for those second and third generation soldiers, participation in the War of 1812 continued to bring free men of color together. Like militiamen in the Spanish period, free black veterans also formed business partnerships and served as witnesses at marriages, sponsors at baptisms, and testamentary executors for one another.[111] Between 1815 and 1830, for example, Second Major Vincent Populus and First Lieutenant Maurice Populus attended twelve weddings while Sergeant Joseph Camps attended nine weddings as witnesses.[112] Veterans also intermarried and sometimes these marriages connected New Orleanians and Saint-Dominguans together.[113] The social and economic circles thus formed among these artisan-soldiers were often strengthened by familial ties and played a vital role in the creation of a free people of color community.

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[111] As will be discussed in more detail below, Henry Fletcher had a close relationship with fellow First Battalion members, Jean Louis and Joseph Dolliole. The Dollioles attended Fletcher's wedding and witnessed his marriage contract. Fletcher and Joseph Dolliole had a business together for a few years after the War of 1812. Joseph Dolliole, in turn, served as godfather for one of Sergeant Joseph Camps' children. Camps served as one of three required witnesses to her 1832 will. See Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 17:153, 233; Marriage Contract Henry Fletcher with Heloise Laville, October 19, 1827; 1822 City Directory; Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 15, 1822-1823 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2000), 65; *Testament*, 1832.

[112] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 90.

[113] One example is the marriage of Second Major Vincent Populus' daughter, Marie Martine, and Hypolite Lafargue in July 1815. Lafargue was from Port-au-Prince and served in the Second Battalion. Marie Martine was born in New Orleans and her father and uncle fought under the Spanish and ranked highly in the First Battalion. First Lieutenant Maurice Populus and Sergeant Joseph Camps joined their commanding officer, Vincent Populus, at the ceremony. Several other battalion members attended the wedding, including Barthelemy Populus, Joseph Cabaret, and Louis Séjour. With the exception of Séjour who served in the Second Battalion with Lafargue, these witnesses served in the First Battalion. The Populus-Lafargue wedding not only reinforced social bonds among veterans but also forged familial ties between them. This show of support carried over to baptisms of veterans' children as well. In 1817, Séjour served as godfather for the Lafargues' first-born child. See Clark, *American Quadroon*, 90; Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 20, 96, 107; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 11:244, 356; Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 12, 1816-1817 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1997), 215; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 97-98.

Eventually First and Second Battalion members created civic associations and benevolent societies that brought them together as veterans or artisans or both. One such organization was *La Société des Artisans.* Founded in 1834, the establishment of the Artisans Society came in the same year as the official end of the free black militia. According to Rodolphe Desdunes, this group of craftsmen included veterans like Louis Séjour whose son, Victor, recited one of his early poetic works at a meeting.[114] *La Société des Artisans* and similar organizations like the Association of Colored Veterans in 1814 and 1815 and the *Société Catholique pour l'instruction des Orphelins dans l'indigence*, which incorporated in 1847 to administer the school founded on Marie Justine Sirnir's land provided outlets for creative, social, and political efforts by free black artisans and former soldiers.[115]

The Great and Growing City

When he arrived in New Orleans to take charge of the Louisiana Territory William C. C. Claiborne was immediately impressed by the potential of the port town located on the Mississippi River. He wrote to President Thomas Jefferson in early January 1804 to relate "that the high expectations I had formed of the value of our new acquisition to the United States, are fully confirmed by my personal observations." In addition to the abundant agricultural production along the banks of the river, "New Orleans," Claiborne wrote, "is a great, and growing City."[116] Although New Orleans

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[114] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes,* 39-40.

[115] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition,* 90; McConnell, *Negro Troops*, 106, 110; *Incorporation de la "Société Catholique pour l'instruction des Orphelins dans l'indigence,"* April 20, 1847, Octave de Armas, Volume 40, Act 85, NARC; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 54, 62-63; Aslakson, "Making Race," 30.

[116] William C.C. Claiborne to Thomas Jefferson, January 16, 1804 in *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Volume 9, eds., Clarence Edwin Carter and John Porter Bloom (Washington, DC: National Archives and Record Services, 1940), 161.

never rivalled New York as Claiborne predicted, the Crescent City did experience extensive economic development, population growth, and physical expansion in the half century following the Louisiana Purchase. Each of these areas of growth fueled the other such that the "straggling town" of New Orleans became the largest and most important Southern city in the antebellum period.[117]

New Orleans' economic growth stemmed from its prime location near the mouth of the Mississippi. With access to the Gulf of Mexico to the south and "a vast continental network of rivers" to the north, the port served as a hub of international and domestic trade and commercial activity.[118] New Orleans received raw materials from its immediate plantation hinterland as well as areas farther upriver and manufactured goods through the transatlantic trade. From there, these products made their way to markets in the Caribbean, Europe, and states in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast, especially after the invention of the steamboat in 1812. Merchant houses, formed to manage the trade in plantation products, proliferated in the city as millions of dollars' worth of cotton and sugar flowed in and out of New Orleans. Banks and insurance companies followed to provide credit for continued expansion and protection against the risks involved in the trade. New Orleans also contained some types of manufacturing, although these enterprises, such as sugar refineries, distilleries, and cotton presses, remained closely tied to plantation agriculture.[119]

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[117] William C. C. Claiborne to Thomas Jefferson, January 16, 1804; Upton, *Another City*, 20; Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries," 295-296, 299; Aslakson, "Making Race," 34, 36, 39; Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas,* quote on 33; James Winston, "Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans, 1803-1836," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (Sept. 1924): 200-201, 226.

[118] Rothman, *Slave Country*, quote on 73; Aslakson, "Making Race," 35-36.

[119] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 78; Aslakson, "Making Race," 36-38; Winston, "Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans," 202-208, 211, 215-216, 218; Jessica Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People,*

The high demand for sugar and cotton elicited an equally high demand for enslaved labor to grow and harvest these crops. Despite fears of an enslaved black population that outnumbered free, white inhabitants of Louisiana, large numbers of slaves were transported to New Orleans to be sold. As discussed in the previous chapter, some of these individuals arrived from Africa or the Caribbean, but after 1808, slaves sold in New Orleans increasingly came from other parts of the United States. The hundreds of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children forcibly removed from the Upper South and sold through the city's slave market played a significant role in the economy as property and labor, adding to New Orleans' reputation as "the Great Commercial Depot of the Western World."[120] Although most enslaved African Americans sold in New Orleans continued on to plantations stretching across the Deep South, their presence augmented the city's population, at least temporarily.

The number of people residing in New Orleans grew substantially over the first part of the nineteenth century. Anglo-Americans from the East Coast and Upper South, spurred by the burgeoning economy, cheap land, and commercial prospects began to arrive in New Orleans in large numbers during the territorial period. In addition to the region's increasing opportunities, Atlantic geopolitics encouraged immigration to New Orleans. Saint-Dominguans, arriving either directly from the island or from other points of refuge, joined these American migrants. The influx of refugees from Cuba in 1809-1810 caused a significant spike in the city's population, doubling it in just a few months' time. This wave of émigrés included large numbers of Francophone free people of color, but English-speaking free black men and women also moved to New Orleans from other

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Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

[120] Rothman, *Slave Country*, quote on 79, 83, 94-95; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5-7.

states. European immigrants, mostly from France, Germany, and Ireland relocated to New Orleans during the antebellum period.[121] Overall, the city's population increased from about 8,000 at the time of the Louisiana Purchase to over 130,000 in 1850. Free and enslaved people of African descent made up the majority the population through 1830, but by 1850 white residents roughly outnumbered New Orleans' black inhabitants three to one.[122]

The size of New Orleans increased during the first half of the nineteenth century to accommodate the growing population. Based on the grid plan laid out by French military engineer Adrian de Pauger in the 1720s, the original town stretched about a mile along the river and half of a mile inland. The rectangular grid, known as the Vieux Carré, consisted of a slightly smaller version of today's French Quarter.[123] Large plantations flanked the town. These lands began to be divided into neighborhoods or "faubourgs" around the turn of the nineteenth century. (Fig. 3) Maria Josepha Deslondes and her husband, Bertrand Gravier, created a residential area on their upriver plantation in 1788. Adjacent to the Vieux Carré, the Faubourg Ste. Marie was the city's first suburb. In 1805 Bernard Marigny subdivided his plantation on the downriver side of the city, establishing the Faubourg Marigny. Claude Tremé began to develop the land he owned immediately behind the city in 1798. This area became the Faubourg Tremé in 1810 when the municipal government purchased the remaining land and sold it as individual lots.

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[121] Rothman, *Slave Country*, 79; Upton, *Another City*, 20, 36-37, 39; Aslakson, "Making Race," 40; Lachance, "The Foreign French," 104-105, 112-115, 120; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900," 209-210; Hirsch and Logsdon, "Introduction to Part II: The American Challenge" in *Creole New Orleans*, 91-96.

[122] Upton, *Another City*, 20, Table 1, 30, Table 3. Specific periods saw intense increases. For example, the influx of Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba increased the population from 8,056 in 1803 to 17,242 in 1810. Between 1820 and 1830, the city's population more than doubled from 27,176 to 46,082 and this occurred again between 1830 and 1840 (46,082 to 102, 193).

[123] Upton, *Another City*, 31-32, 36; Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans' Vieux Carré*, (New Orleans, LA: Tulane School of Architecture, 1997), 1-2, 4.

Additional suburbs expanded the city in both directions along the river, but these neighborhoods filled in more slowly than the three closest to the French Quarter.[124]

The natural topography of the area significantly shaped the city's growth in the nineteenth century. New Orleans sits on a broad curve in the Mississippi River on a thin strip of natural levee. The site selected for the French settlement in 1718 formed the highest available ground and composed one end of a portage—long utilized by Native Americans—that connected the river to Bayou St. Jean and on to Lake Pontchartrain. Past this narrow ridge and moving away from the river towards the lake, the low-lying land was prone to flooding and consisted mostly of cypress swamps. Three bayous flowed between the river and the lake, segmented by the Gentilly and Metairie ridges. These slender strips of raised land created by sediment deposited by the river held back water from Lake Pontchartrain but also blocked the flow of water towards the lake as it drained from the higher natural levee. This formed a bowl-like depression that flooded easily. It was not until the twentieth century that the city created a sophisticated enough pump system to drain the interior lands and make them inhabitable. Thus, the metropolitan area expanded in a narrow line along the riverfront rather than away from the river towards the lake.[125]

Throughout the early nineteenth century, the city's residential patterns were economically and racially mixed. Ethnic and racial groups tended to congregate in

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[124] Samuel Wilson, Jr., "Early History of Faubourg St. Mary" in *New Orleans Architecture, Volume II: The American Sector*, eds., Mary Louise Christovich and Roulhac Toledano (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1972), 7-8; Samuel Wilson, Jr., "Early History," Toledano, et.al., *Creole Faubourgs*, 8, 13-22; Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road*, 16-17; Upton, *Another City*, 32; Magill, "New Orleans Through Three Centuries," 296-301.

[125] Upton, *Another City*, 32; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 2; Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries," 293-294, 304-305; Craig Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005), 2-5, 140-141; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 75; Hirsch and Logsdon, "Introduction to Part III," 198.

specific areas, but these concentrations were by no means exclusive. Urban slavery brought white and black people together on a daily basis, and enslaved individuals often lived and worked in close proximity to their owners.[126] However, a clear ethno-cultural divide existed between Anglophones and Francophones, whose elite white members vied for control over the city after the Louisiana Purchase. Anglo-Americans settled in the Faubourg Ste. Marie (St. Mary) and the upriver suburbs as they developed. Irish and German immigrants mostly lived in these uptown areas as well. French immigrants joined white and free black French-speaking Creoles and Saint-Domingue refugees in the Vieux Carré and the downriver faubourgs. Canal Street, which separated the Faubourg Ste. Marie from the French Quarter, served as the unofficial dividing line between the "American" and "Creole" sectors. The hostility between these two groups grew so great that in 1836 the state legislature divided New Orleans into three municipalities "each with its own laws and government." This partition lasted until 1852, at which point the Anglophone population achieved ascendancy in the reassembled city.[127]

With one lot in the French Quarter and the other in the Faubourg Marigny, Marie Justine Simir's properties were located in the heart of what became the "Creole" sector. (Fig. 4) When she purchased these lands in 1806, however, the cultural-spatial division among "Americans" and "Creoles" had only started to emerge. At this time, most people

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[126] Upton, *Another City*, 36, 38; Hirsch and Logsdon, "Franco-Africans and African-Americans," 197-198; Daphne Spain, "Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox," in "Race and Residence in American Cities," special issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 441 (Jan. 1979): 86; Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans*, (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 171, 173-175; John Michael Vlach, " 'Without Recourse to Owners:' The Architecture of Urban Slavery in the Antebellum South," in "Shaping Communities," special issue, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. 6 (1997): 151, 157.

[127] Upton, *Another City*, quote on 39; Magill, "New Orleans Through Three Centuries," 297-300; Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 162-163. The First Municipality consisted of the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé. The Second Municipality contained the "American sector" of the Faubourg Ste. Marie and other upriver suburbs. The Third Municipality included the Faubourg Marigny and the downriver suburbs.

lived in the Vieux Carré. Wealthier residents tended to reside on the streets closest to the river. As one moved both away from the Mississippi and out from the center of the grid, the prices of real estate decreased, as did the extent of development.[128] Sirnir purchased lots in 1806 that were situated in peripheral and, in the case of the Marigny parcel, undeveloped areas. However, as the city expanded downriver and the surrounding land built up, the edge of the city shifted such that Sirnir's properties became more centrally located within the downtown "Creole" sector.

The half lot Sirnir bought on Barracks Street sat quite literally on the edge of the Vieux Carré in 1806. Named for the military quarters located at one end, Barracks (also referred to as Quartier and Garrison) was an additional street appended to Pauger's original grid during the Spanish period.[129] The blocks on the street's downriver side formed the last row of houses, running along a diagonal line of fortifications from the river towards what is now Rampart Street. The defenses, reworked by the Spanish from their original French iteration, consisted of moats and palisades that connected five forts at each corner and one in the center at the back of the town. The fortifications remained at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, albeit in a dilapidated state.[130] For several years after Sirnir bought the lot, the ruins of the palisades abutted the back of her property. Both the federal government and the city laid claim to this strip of land, referred to as "the Commons." Eventually the city won out and divided the Commons into lots to be sold.

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[128] Upton, *Another City*, 34; Aslakson, "Making Race," 43; 1805 City Directory.

[129] John Churchill Chase, *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children and Other Streets of New Orleans*, 3rd ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1979), 57.

[130] Upton, *Another City*, 33; Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries," 295; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 3-4. Although the French intended New Orleans to be a fortified city from the beginning, it was not until the Seven Years' War that defenses were fully constructed. The Spanish remade the defenses in the 1790s, adding the five forts.

This development filled in the downriver blocks between Barracks Street and Esplanade Avenue and connected the streets of the French Quarter to the Faubourg Marigny.[131]

While the old fortifications filled Sirnir's backyard, the front of her property looked towards the large Ursuline convent complex and the military barracks. Together, these establishments covered the space of four blocks between Levee, Barracks, Royal, and Ursulines Streets. This massive square impeded the continuation of Condé Street, which cut off Sirnir and her immediate neighbors on Barracks from direct access to the rest of the town. As the Commons and the Faubourg Marigny became more developed, this lack of thoroughfare proved a source of frustration for residents in these areas. In 1819 the city pressed the Ursulines to allow Condé Street to pass through the convent complex. The nuns refused and instead built a new convent downriver on land they had previously purchased. In 1824, the bishop took over the old convent and Condé and Hospital Streets were cut through the site to create four separate blocks.[132]

Although the location of the convent may have been an inconvenience to Sirnir in some ways, its presence also had several positive aspects for Sirnir and her husband. For one thing, living so close to the convent allowed Bernard to maintain contact with family members who remained enslaved by the nuns. More importantly for Sirnir, the convent complex housed a large and heterogeneous group of women, including the nuns, boarding students, day students, orphans, servants, and slaves. The Ursulines' mission centered on female education and their students included young women of African descent. In the French period, the nuns created a lay confraternity that made significant inroads among

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[131] Upton, *Another City*, 33. The diagonal fortification line can still be seen in the property lines of this last row of blocks.

[132] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 242-243; Hilary Irvin, "Ursuline Convent," *KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, ed. David Johnson (Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 2010), accessed May 16, 2014, http://www.knowla.org/entry/579/.

the enslaved population through catechism courses.[133] Living in the shadow of the convent, Sirnir maintained very close proximity to a diverse group of religious women dedicated to educating women and girls and taking care of the poor, the orphaned, and the ill and the abused.[134] The Ursulines' work at the convent may have offered early inspiration for Sirnir's idea for a school for colored orphans in the Faubourg Marigny. Sirnir may have attended services at the church in the compound, which would have given her access to these educational enterprises up close. She almost certainly went there after the nuns moved downriver. Father Maenhaut, the priest whom Sirnir named as supervisor of the school in her 1832 will, served at the old convent church (known as St. Mary's) in the 1830s.[135] It would have been convenient for the elderly Sirnir to attend a church located around the corner from her home.

Affordability likely played a significant role in Sirnir's decision to purchase the half lot on Barracks Street. Because it was located in an under-developed area, the lot cost less than real estate in other parts of the Vieux Carré. Demographics may have also influenced Sirnir's choice to settle there. The 1805 City Directory indicates that more white people lived on Barracks street than free people of color.[136] However, more free people of color lived on the downriver side of the French Quarter than on the upriver side, and free black residents made up a larger percentage of total residents in that half of the town.[137] Free people of color significantly outnumbered white inhabitants on specific

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[133] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 2-3, 150-151, 154, 157.

[134] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 103.

[135] Paxton's 1830 City Directory; New Orleans Directory, S. E. Percy and Co. 1832; *St. Mary, Chartres Street, Baptisms,* Volume 1, April 6, 1805- March 11, 1838, AANO. Father Maenhaut signed the entries for baptisms at St. Mary's between 1828 and 1838 (when the volume ends).

[136] 1805 City Directory. The directory enumerates 117 white residents and 39 free black residents on Barracks Street.

[137] 1805 City Directory. For these calculations, I divided the French Quarter in half along Orleans Street, its central corridor. The downriver side includes the following streets running perpendicular to the river: St.

streets, including Burgundy and Dauphine.[138] By 1810, the number of free people of color living on Barracks Street had more than tripled so that they approximately equaled white residents on the street.[139] The households immediately surrounding Sirnir's property in the census all contained free people of color and most were headed by free black men or women.[140]

Some of these residents had lived on Barracks since the late Spanish period. Henry Fletcher's grandparents, Baptiste and Marie Therese Maxent, were among these established free black inhabitants. Baptiste Maxent owned property in the next block over from Sirnir's house, moving away from the river. He received the land as a concession from Spanish Governor Carondelet on February 15, 1793.[141] The 1805 City Directory listed Maxent at 43 Barracks Street as the head of a household containing one free man of color, one free woman of color, and two free black males under sixteen years old. These are presumably the same four free black inhabitants listed in Baptiste Maxent's residence

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Anne, Dumaine, St. Philip, Ursulines, Hospital (now Gov. Nicholls), and Barracks. In the 1805 city directory, the streets parallel to the river were labeled north and south. The downriver parallel streets include Levee N (now Decatur), Condé (now Chartres), Royal N, Bourbon N, Dauphine N, and Burgundy N. Not including residents on Orleans Street (102 whites, 103 free people of color), a total of 1,961 people lived on the downriver side. Free people of color made up 36 percent of this total (706) and whites made up 64 percent of the total (1,255). More people lived on the upriver side than the downriver side. Of the 2,102 residents in the upriver section, 27 percent (564) were free people of color, whereas, 73 percent (1,538) were white people. Enslaved individuals on the upriver side outnumbered those on the downriver side significantly (982 and 1,516, respectively).

[138] 1805 City Directory. In fact, some properties on Burgundy remained in the possession of free black owners throughout the nineteenth century. See, for example, lots on Burgundy in Square 84 (between St. Philip and Ursulines) in the Vieux Carré Survey. Lot 23107 was owned by various free people of color from 1787 to 1899. Vieux Carré Survey, accessed May 18, 2014, http://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property _info.php?lot=23107; *Inventaire de Louison Després*, Acts of P.F.S. Godefroy, May 12, 1809, Volume 1, page 153, NARC.

[139] 1810 Census, page 244-245. By 1810, 428 people lived on Barracks Street, including 152 free people of color, 157 whites, and 119 slaves.

[140] 1810 Census, page 245. Sirnir's household was one of ten in a row that contained free people of color. Two of these ten households also included white residents. The 1810 Census did not distinguish by sex or age among free people of color or slaves nor does it distinguish renters from owners.

[141] Vieux Carré Survey, accessed August 18, 2013, http://www.hnoc.org/ vcs /property _info.php?lot =22841 and http://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property_info.php?lot=22842; *Testament par Baptiste Maxent*, June 21, 1808, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 232, NARC; [Sale of land], December 8, 1817, Acts of Philippe Pedesclaux, Volume 3, page 833, NARC.

in the 1810 Census. The woman was certainly Fletcher's grandmother, Marie Therese, while the two boys were likely Fletcher and his cousin, Jean Baptiste Pechon.[142] Thus, Henry Fletcher quite possibly grew up a few houses away from Marie Justine Sirnir. If he did not live with his grandparents the whole time, he would have visited them and therefore spent time in Sirnir's neighborhood. Fletcher and Sirnir's geographic proximity forms one way in which their lives intersected.

The increase in the number of free black residents on Barracks between 1805 and 1810 stemmed directly from the relocation of thousands of free black Saint-Dominguans from Cuba. Other nearby streets such as Hospital experienced a similar growth in both total population and the percentage of free people of color compared to white residents.[143] At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, an estimated 1,000 houses held the 8,056 people living in New Orleans.[144]

The available housing in the city could not accommodate so many refugees arriving at once. Émigrés were forced to cram into rented "dependencies" of main houses—"service buildings set along the rear of the lot or occasionally at right angles to the Creole cottage [that] sheltered slaves and work spaces and delineated rear courtyards that were important elements of the New Orleans cityscape."[145]

Testaments recorded by free women of color refugees soon after arrival indicate the types of spaces they rented. Jeannette Azulima, the bathhouse owner from Le Cap,

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[142] 1805 City Directory; 1810 Census, page 244. In 1805 Fletcher was fourteen years old and his cousin Baptiste was younger. It is unclear where the boys' mothers lived at this time. They may have also lived there but were not included in these sources. A census taken in 1795 lists Baptiste Maxent as the head of a household that contained six free people of color. The demographics for the household suggest that Fletcher and Pechon lived there with their mothers and grandparents. See Virginia Gould, "1795 New Orleans Census" in Hall, *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy.*

[143] Compare the 1805 City Directory with the 1810 Census.

[144] Upton, *Another City,* 20, Table 1, 38.

[145] Jay Edwards, "Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America," *Buildings and Landscape*, 16, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 67; Upton, *Another City*, quote on 35.

was "found by the notary and witnesses in a room dependent of a house situated in this city Bourbon Street number 61."[146] Marie Charlotte Rolland was "in her bed in a room at the back of a courtyard dependent of the house of [blank] on Hospital Street, no. 52."[147] The notary and witnesses sent to record the testament of Jeannette, a free woman of color from Jérémie, also found her "in her bed in a room in a house located on Bourbon Street at the back of a courtyard between Orleans Street and St. Anne Street."[148] Often refugees shared these rented outbuildings with family members, slaves, and other refugees. Rolland lived with her six children, ranging in age from sixteen to two and a half. Jeannette had three children with her, as well as two enslaved women.[149]

It is possible that Sirnir rented accommodations to Saint-Dominguans newly-arrived from Cuba. When she purchased the lot in 1806 from Maria de los Santo Dias the property contained one house. By the time Sirnir recorded her first will in 1812, the lot included two houses, offset from one another, with a courtyard in between. Sirnir lived in the house at the rear of the courtyard. The front house sat directly on Barracks Street and contained three rooms.[150] Sirnir may have rented this house to earn extra income. The 1822 City Directory listed a woman named Leonora Remy at "28 Barrack bel. Condé," which is the same address provided for Bernard Couvent.[151] This suggests that Sirnir leased the house on the front of the property to Remy.

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[146] *Testament de Jeanette Azulima*, February 27, 1811.

[147] *Testament de Marie Charlotte Rolland*, April 18, 1810.

[148] *Testament de Jeannette, femme de couleur libre*, August 15, 1810, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 21, page 285, NARC.

[149] *Testament de Marie Charlotte Rolland*, April 18, 1810; *Testament de Jeannette*, April 15, 1810.

[150] *Vente de terrain par Dame Marie de los Santos Dias à Marie Justine Sirnir*; *Testament*, 1812. This likely indicates that the house was a linear cottage—a prototype of the New Orleans shot-gun house that, according to architectural historian Jay Edwards, free black Saint-Domingue builders brought to the city. See Edwards, "Shotgun," 70-74, 78.

[151] 1822 City Directory.

By the late Spanish period, renting rooms and houses provided a significant source of income to free women of color. [152] As this was also the case in Cap Français, Sirnir would have been exposed to the practice of owning rental properties before her arrival. Both port cities contained a large transient population that needed short-term housing and made rental property a valuable investment. A census taken in 1795 reported a high level of renting in the city. In addition to the sizeable number of temporary residents, the city had also suffered two devastating fires prior to 1795 that limited the available housing for a growing population.[153] Of the 471 total houses included in the census, 427 of them were rental properties. Free people of color owned eighty-two of these, and ninety percent of those eighty-two rental houses belonged to free women of color. Over half of all landowning women of African descent rented properties to tenants in 1795.[154] Free women of color took advantage of the competition for housing by charging high rental prices. In 1799, a white tenant filed two petitions with the Spanish government requesting a fair rate for his monthly rent. Apparently, the petitioner's

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[152] King and Rogers, "Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières," 370-373; Socolow, "Economic Roles," 283-284; Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 161; Kimberly Hanger, "Landlords, Shopkeepers, Farmers, and Slave-Owners: Free Black Female Property-Holders in Colonial New Orleans" in Hine and Gaspar, *Beyond Bondage*, 220-221, 223.

[153] Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 161; Hanger, "Free Black Female Property-Holders," 223; Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries," 295. The first fire occurred in 1788 and destroyed 856 houses and buildings. The second fire, which broke out in 1794, caused damage to at least 200 buildings. Residents who lost property in the 1788 fire filed claims for their losses with the government. Free women of color filed fifty-one claims, making up ten percent of the total. Free men of color only filed four percent of the claims. The average loss for free women of color was greater than that of free black men by over 100 pesos. See Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 86.

[154] Gould, "Afro-Creole Women," 161-162, Table 3. Free black women landlords far outnumbered their male counterparts. Only twenty percent of free men of color proprietors rented their property, according to the 1795 census. The percentage of white women landlords was comparable to that of free women of color. White men rented the most property—278 of the 427 rental properties were owned by white men and fifty-nine percent of white male owners rented out property. Gould suggests that racism may have kept white tenants from renting a house owned by a free man of color. Free black men may have also rented to enslaved individuals and thus did not disclose this to the census taker.

landlord, a free woman of color named Mariana Brion, had raised the rent from nineteen pesos to forty pesos within the space of two years.[155]

Although later censuses do not include information on rental properties, notary records point to free women of color's continued participation in the real estate market as investors and landlords.[156] Once Marie Justine Sirnir improved her Faubourg Marigny property with "a house and several dependencies," she likely rented it, although direct evidence, such as a rental contract, has not been located.[157] It also remains unclear exactly when Sirnir developed her lot at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets.

Other free women of color turned their investment in the new neighborhood into rental properties within a few years of purchasing lots there. In 1811, for example, Marguerite Crebs hired Jean Baptiste Rey and Cadet Rey, free black builders and Saint-Domingue refugees, to construct a house on her Faubourg Marigny lot at the corner of Grands Hommes and Marigny Streets. She originally bought the lot from Bernard Marigny in 1806. Crebs already lived on Marigny Street, likely in another house built previously on one half of the lot. The building contract indicates that the new four-room house would be a rental property. At the rate of seven dollars a month, Crebs planned to

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[155] Hanger, "Free Black Female Property-Holders," 221.

[156] Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of Their Liberty," 275-276. Compared to Saint-Domingue, rental contracts are less prevalent in New Orleans notary records. However, evidence of renting can be found in other types of notary documents, including testaments, inventories, and building contracts. Newspapers also contained advertisements for rental properties. In addition, a comparison of city directories (inhabitants) with the Vieux Carré Survey (owners) indicates properties in the French Quarter that were leased to tenants. Although their exact numbers are unknown, free women of color proprietors had a reputation among nineteenth-century travel writers as good hostesses and landlords. Travel accounts typically insinuated that the landlord provided sexual services to her tenants. There is little proof that this was a widespread practice among free women of color owners of rental properties. See Clark, *American Quadroon*, 130-131, 171-172.

[157] 1832 *Testament*. Sirnir's improvements to the lot took place sometime after she recorded her 1812 will. Her lack of description and specific instructions for the Marigny lot in the 1812 testament suggest that the lot remained bare.

rent the two rooms overlooking the street in order to pay the Reys a total of $200 for their labor and supplies.[158]

The construction of Crebs' rental house occurred shortly after the arrival of Saint-Dominguans from Cuba. Crebs may have capitalized on the shortage of housing in the Vieux Carré by renting to refugees in the newly-created Faubourg Marigny. Rosalie Chesneau, for example, rented a house in the suburb from a white carpenter named Pierre Matignan. Located on Histoire Street, this house was where she recorded her first will. Chesneau named several refugees in her 1810 testament, including the Widow Daubert and Marie Claire Datty. These women were also Chesneau's neighbors on Histoire.[159] Upon their arrival, both white and free black refugees sought affordable places to live in close proximity to other Saint-Dominguans. The Faubourg Marigny, created soon after the first wave of refugees arrived in 1803-1804, provided such options. Saint-Dominguans, especially free black refugees, played an important role in settling and building this area.[160]

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[158] *Marché entre Bte Rey et Cadet Rey et Margte Crebs*, May 28, 1811, in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 26, page 251, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Marguerite Crebs*, October 2, 1806, Narcisse Broutin, Volume 14, page 39, NARC; 1810 Census, page 275. Crebs bought a full lot, measuring 60 X 120 French feet. Full-size lots were often divided into two lots (30 X 120 feet) so it is likely that Crebs lived on one half of the lot and had the Reys build a rental house on the other half.

[159] 1810 Census, page 275; *Testament de Rosalie Chesneau, fcl*, January 25, 1810, Narcisse Broutin, Vol. 21, page 226, NARC; *Codicile de Rosalie Chesneau f.c.l*, January 26, 1810, Narcisse Broutin, Vol. 22, page 38, NARC. Chesneau named Marie Claire Datty, a free woman of color from Jean Rabel, as a beneficiary. Marie Claire Rigaud, Widow Daubert was a white refugee from Le Cap. Chesneau refers to Dauber as "her friend" and names Daubert's son has her executor. In the codicil, Chesneau switched her executor from the Widow Daubert's son to André Ducongé, a white refugee from her hometown of Jean Rabel. It is unclear where Ducongé lived, but the 1810 Census lists Petiton Ducongé, another refugee from Jean Rabel who was likely a relative of André Ducongé, immediately after Chesneau on Histoire Street.

[160] Edwards, "Shotgun," 66-67; Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 26-27; Magill, "New Orleans through Three Centuries," 297.

Constructing the Faubourg Marigny

Bernard Marigny inherited the plantation of his father, Pierre de Marigny de Mandeville in 1800. Five years later Marigny decided to subdivide his large swath of land into streets and blocks with parcels to be sold. Under the tutelage of his curator, Salomon Prevost, the minor Marigny gained permission from the City Council on April 19, 1805 to create the city's first downriver suburb.[161] For the initial eight months of sales Bernard Marigny called his suburb the "Faubourg St. Bernard," but subsequent sale records referred to the area as the "*Faubourg Marigny ou St. Bernard.*"[162] By 1810 "Marigny" had won out over "St. Bernard," and this remains the name of the neighborhood bounded by present-day Esplanade Avenue, St. Claude Avenue, Franklin Street and the Mississippi River.

Five months after receiving permission to develop his plantation into a residential area, Bernard Marigny began to sell lots to individual buyers. Scottish-born entrepreneur Alexander Milne purchased the first two pieces of land on September 19, 1805.[163] An additional twenty-nine transactions followed, and by the end of the year, Marigny had sold 119 lots to thirty-one different buyers. All of these first purchasers were white and all but two of them were men. Several of these early transactions involved numerous parcels, including entire blocks at a time.[164] John McDonogh, for example, purchased

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[161] *Acte pour autoriser le curateur de Bernard Marigny à faire les ventes y mentionées, (approuvé le 19 Avril 1805)*, Governor's Office Private Dispatches of Gov. Miro, 1784-1794, Vault A515 1784-1830, NOPL; Wilson, "Early History," 3, 8.

[162] See land sales between Bernard Marigny and various individuals beginning on April 30, 1806 through at least September 29, 1809 in the records of N. Broutin, Volumes 12-18; P.F.S. Godefroy, Volumes 1-2; and M. de Armas, Volume, 2, NARC.

[163] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Alexandre Milne*, September 19, 1805 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 11, page 645, NARC.

[164] See sales acts in N. Broutin, Volume 11, pages 645, 704, 705, 707, 710, 715, 718, 728, 730, 731, 734, 744, 745, 747, 749, 750, 756, 759, 762, 763, 814, 835, 845, 846, 852, 857, 861, and 863, NARC. The Jourdan siblings, Rosalie and her two brothers, Pierre and Barthelemy, purchased an entire block,

forty lots, which made up almost three whole squares. A notation on the transaction document pronounced the sale annulled, however, on December 22, 1806.[165] In fact, the records indicate that six of these initial 1805 sales were voided within the first three years. The cancelled sales returned over half of the 119 lots to Marigny's possession. With little effort, he sold the lots again to new buyers. On April 25, 1807, for example, a free black carpenter named Colas Mandeville purchased three of the lots forfeited by McDonogh for $900.[166]

Although the records for the 1805 sales referenced lot numbers and street names, the faubourg remained undeveloped. The early transactions indicated that the lots would not be ready until January 1806. While the sale records provided measurements for the parcels, a few documents included the stipulation: "if layout is different from plan, the acquirer will pay more or less."[167] Clearly Marigny had an idea of the shape of the neighborhood in 1805, but he would not deposit an official plan in the notary's office for public viewing until the following March.

Bernard Marigny hired Nicolas de Finiels, a French engineer, to draft a plan of the suburb.[168] Finiels transformed Marigny's vast plantation into an urban neighborhood on paper. The faubourg consisted of fifty-nine blocks or squares crisscrossed by twenty

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containing twelve lots, for $5,000 on December 4, 1805. They had paid for the land by May 8, 1807. See page 814.

[165] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à John McDonogh, fils et Cie*, December 17, 1805 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 11, page 835, NARC. It is unclear why McDonogh's 40-lot purchase was annulled. The record indicated a promise to pay $12,600 for the land within a year. Perhaps he could not come up with the money in the time allotted and opted to "return" the lots to Marigny. In 1805, McDonogh was just getting his start in New Orleans in the shipping business. By the time of his death in 1850, McDonogh had become a wealthy entrepreneur and planter. He owned an enormous amount of real estate on both sides of the Mississippi and a large number of slaves.

[166] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Colas Mandeville*, April 25, 1807 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 15, page 149, NARC.

[167] For example, see *Vente de terrain par Sieur Bernard Marigny à Sieur Martin Joseph Eugene O'Duhigg*, October 31, 1805 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 11, page 734, NARC.

[168] Wilson, "Early History," 8-9. After serving for France in the American Revolution, Finiels joined the Spanish militia and mapped much of the Mississippi Valley during the late eighteenth century.

streets. (Fig. 5) Streets running parallel to the river from the Vieux Carré connected with those in the suburb after crossing over Esplanade Avenue. Marigny gave the streets of his faubourg colorful names like Grands Hommes (Great Men), Bons Enfans (Good Children), Histoire (History), Paix (Peace), Musique (Music), Amour (Love), Les Mystérieuse (Mystery), Bagatelle, and Craps. Most of the blocks were of a uniform size, although some took on unusual shapes around the edges of the neighborhood to fit this layout of the streets.

Finiels divided fifty-five squares into 619 lots to be sold. Most squares contained five lots that faced the streets running parallel to the river with a standard measurement of 60 by 120 French feet and two center lots that opened to the side streets, measuring 50 by 145 French feet. In the odd-shaped blocks closest to the city, measurements of individual lots varied. Bernard Marigny's residence and outbuildings, located near the river, took up two full squares. The plan set aside another block for a park, which Marigny named Washington Square. A block was also reserved for a hospital that never came to fruition.[169]

A canal, which already existed on Marigny's property for a saw mill, ran down the central avenue, designated as Champs Elysées (Elysian Fields) or Promenade Publique. On the plan Finiels explained, "The canal is shown fifty feet in width from the river as far as Bayou St. John; the streets and promenades on each side of the canal to the back of the Faubourg only, are fifty feet wide; all the other streets are forty six feet wide with the exception of Good Children street which is only forty, in order to join St. Claude street in

[169] Wilson, "Early History," 8-9; Plan of Faubourg Marigny by Nicholas de Finiels, March 16, 1806, NARC.

the Faubourg of Mr. Tremé."[170] In the 1830s, the Pontchartrain Railroad was installed along the canal which provided transportation between the river and the lake.[171]

With the completion of Finiels' map, dated March 16, 1806, Marigny deposited it in the office of notary public, Narcisse Broutin.[172] On March 26, Rodrigo Barela and his wife, Françoise Vincent, purchased the first lot after the design of the suburb was exhibited on paper. The couple bought lot no. 70, located at the corner of Moreau and Marigny Streets for $600.[173] With the plan hanging on Broutin's office wall buyers could choose the parcels they intended to purchase after viewing the illustration. The Barelas chose a lot across the street from Marigny's plantation. A few weeks later Marie Justine Sirnir arrived at Broutin's office to record her purchase of lot no. 253 at the intersection of Grands Hommes and Union Streets.[174] We can imagine Sirnir using the plan of the faubourg to make her choice. She picked a standard-sized, corner lot in a square located a short distance from her house on Barracks street. If the map indicated which lots had already been purchased, then Sirnir would have known that several lots in that block had sold in the last few days.[175] Finiels' plan allowed buyers like Sirnir and the Barelas to envision homes and businesses on their newly-purchased land in a fully developed neighborhood. This visual representation was important for attracting buyers because, in

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[170] Quoted in Wilson, "Early History," 9; Plan of Faubourg Marigny, March 16, 1806.

[171] Wilson, "Early History," 10-11.

[172] Sales of lots in the Faubourg Marigny found in the records of Narcisse Broutin between March 26, 1806 and October 27, 1808 reference Finiels' plan and explain that it has been deposited in Broutin's office. See Acts of N. Broutin, Volumes 11 and 12, NARC.

[173] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Rodrigo Barela*, March 26, 1806 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, page 128, NARC. Three years later, Barela purchased the adjoining lot, No. 71, on Moreau Street for $1200. See *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Rodrigues Barella*, June 3, 1809 in Acts of P.F.S. Godefroy, Volume 1, page 238. Although Rodrigo Barela died in 1812, his widow continued to live at 101 Moreau, corner of Marigny a decade later. See 1822 City Directory.

[174] *Vente de terrain par Sr. Marigny à M.ie Jst.ne Sirnaire*, May 13, 1806, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, page 100, NARC.

[175] Marigny sold nine lots in close proximity to no. 253 between May 10 and May 13, 1806. All but one of the buyers were labeled as free people of color. See Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, pages 251, 253, 256, 258, 260, 261, 267, 268, 269.

reality, the neatly angled streets and squares divided into individual lots did not exist. In fact, the terms of the sales obligated new owners to surround their lots with stakes within three months in order to mark their boundaries.[176]

For the physical conversion of plantation land into the faubourg outlined by Finiels' plan, Marigny turned to surveyor and engineer Barthelemy Lafon. On November 18, 1806, Marigny contracted Lafon to lay out the streets and blocks. The agreement required Lafon to place boundary stones at the corner of each square, demarcating the individual lots as he went along, and to draw two plans of the faubourg with the lots numbered and the dimensions of each provided. He would also determine the limits of Marigny's plantation and build a road. By December, the contract stipulated, Lafon would begin laying out the lots, and by February, he would finish marking the boundaries of each block. Marigny promised to pay Lafon $700 at the end of February 1807. In addition, Marigny agreed to provide the boundary stones and all of the slaves Lafon needed to carry out "the above mentioned operations."[177] Before free men of color made their mark on the Faubourg Marigny's built environment, then, enslaved black men performed the initial labor that brought the neighborhood into being. Completion of this project took longer than the timeline specified in the contract. On May 25, 1813, the

[176] See land sales by Bernard Marigny beginning May 10, 1806 in the records of N. Broutin, Volumes 12-18 and P.F.S. Godefroy, Volume 1, NARC.

[177] *Conventions entre Sieur Bernard Marigny et Sieur Barthelemy Lafon*, November 18,1806 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 88, NARC; Wilson, "Early History," 9. The Historic New Orleans Collection holds a plan of the Faubourg Marigny by Claude D'Hemecourt made in the 1870s. The map is a copy of one of Lafon's 1807 plans and contains the names of lot owners. "M. Just. Sirnaire" is listed at no. 253. D'Hémécourt, *Plan du Faubourg Marigny conforme au trace fait par Bm. Lafon Ingr. Geog. et Arpenteur du Compte d'Orleans*, accessed March 13, 2014, http://hnoc.minisisinc.com/thnoc/catalog/1/7103.

notary recorded a receipt of payment to Lafon for having fulfilled his part of the contract to Bernard Marigny's "entire satisfaction."[178]

The Faubourg Marigny, along with the neighboring Faubourg Tremé, proved to be a popular and convenient place for free people of color—New Orleanians and Saint-Dominguans, alike—to live and buy land. In 1806, the first full year of sales, more than half of the buyers were free people of color. By September 19, 1809, exactly four years after the first sale, Marigny had sold over 600 lots to more than 300 different individuals. Overall, free people of color made up an estimated forty percent of these buyers. Some of these early purchasers continued to own their lots for decades, like Marie Justine Sirnir. Many buyers, however, resold their land, usually earning a profit in the process. Sally Evans Reeves estimates that three-quarters of the lots in the Marigny had been owned by a free person of color at least once during the first half of the nineteenth century.[179]

Construction on the lots began long before Marigny and Lafon recorded the quittance document. Although the earliest extant building contract for the Faubourg Marigny dates from 1810, houses were erected prior to that time. Many of these first buildings were quickly raised temporary structures, sometimes referred to as "*cabannes*."[180] In order to facilitate the building process, on August 26, 1807, Marigny granted individual buyers the right to cut down timber in the swampy cypress groves on his land to use as construction materials. For the next five years, he allowed owners "all of the cypress wood that they think fit to build on their lots in the said suburb" as well as

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[178] Quoted in Wilson, "Early History," 9; *Quittance par B.my Lafon à Bd. Marigny*, May 25, 1813, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 28, page 266, NARC.

[179] Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 27.

[180] Roulhac Toledano, Sally Kittredge Evans, and Mary Louise Christovich, "Introduction," in Toledano, et. al., *Creole Faubourgs*, xiii; Edwards, "Shotgun," 71; Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 27.

the use of any land near the canal that is necessary" so that they could "construct as swiftly as they can."[181]

While Lafon laid out the subdivision, Marigny found a steady stream of buyers for the lots. If the initial investors in the neighborhood were mainly white planters and businessmen, this changed the following year. In 1806 a total of seventy individuals bought ninety-eight lots in sixty-one separate sales. Free people of color made up sixty percent of these buyers with men just slightly outnumbering women. [182] The following year saw an even higher number of sales, as 159 people purchased a total of 234 lots. To complete these transactions, Marigny made hundreds of visits to the notary office, often recording multiple sales per day.[183] The quantity of purchases dropped off in 1808 but picked up again in 1809.[184]

After the bulk sales made to single buyers in 1805, many of which ended up null, Marigny "turned to volume sales and the small investor."[185] Individual buyers usually purchased one or two lots at a time, although some people purchased larger packages. For

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[181] *Déclaration par Sieur Bernard Marigny en faveur des acquéreurs des terrains de son faubourg*, August 26, 1807 in the Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 92, NARC.

[182] My calculations based on the sale records of Faubourg Marigny lots made between March 26, 1806 and December 29, 1806 in the Acts of Narcisse Broutin, Volumes12-14, NARC. Men made up almost 90% of white buyers and these distributions by race and sex continued through 1809. To determine the buyer's race, I relied on descriptions in the sale record or cross-referenced the names with other documents. Although notaries were legally obligated to describe free people of color as such, they did not do so in all cases. Thus, there were some individuals whose race remained undetermined and therefore my calculations are estimates.

[183] My calculations based on the sale records of Faubourg Marigny lots made between January 31, 1807 and December 1, 1807 in the Acts of Narcisse Broutin, Volumes 14-17, NARC. On April 24, 1807, Marigny made a record number of fourteen sales in one day. See land sales in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 15, pages 132-145, NARC.

[184] Only nine sales took place in 1808. It is unclear why the number was so small. Since most of the early sales allowed for an eighteen month window to pay, Marigny may have wanted to make sure he received payments for lots sold in 1806 and early 1807 before selling more in 1808. Another possibility is that the market became glutted in 1808, recovering when the Saint-Domingue refugees began to arrive in 1809. Personal reasons may have also played a role. Marigny's wife died in the summer of 1808. This event may have prevented him from devoting as much of his time to real estate as he did in the previous two years.

[185] Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 27.

example, Agnes Mathieu, *negresse libre*, bought four lots on June 20, 1806.[186] Most free women of color, however, bought single lots like Sirnir. Repeat buyers were common. In 1807 Agnes Mathieu and her husband, Mathieu Ramis, bought six more lots. She added to these investments with an additional purchase the following year. The couple donated portions of these lots to Agnes' six children.[187] Some buyers partnered with family members, friends, or business associates to invest in real estate in the Faubourg Marigny. In 1806, for example, Henry Bricou (Henry Fletcher's godfather) and his brother-in-law, Charles Dupart went in together to purchase three lots on Craps street.[188] Marie Populus, Rosalie Vincent, and Françoise Populus also bought three lots as a group in 1809.[189] Buying land with others allowed free people of color to pool their resources and share in the profits from renting or reselling the lot.

Sharing the risk of investment with one or more business partners made the relatively inexpensive plots more affordable for free black buyers. The price per lot varied depending on size and location; however, most parcels cost about $500 each. Marigny sold his land on very easy credit terms for the first three years. Rarely demanding a down payment, he allowed most buyers between twelve and eighteen months to submit the full price. In 1807, the stipulations shifted so that payments were made in equal installments, due in one, two, and three years from the time of purchase.

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[186] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Agnes Mathieu*, June 20, 1806 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 13, page 66, NARC.

[187] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Mathieu Ramis et Agnes Mathieu sa femme*, January 31, 1807, in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 156, NARC; [Donation of Land], January 31, 1807, in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 14, page 157, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Mathieu Ramis et Agnes Mathieu sa femme*, April 27, 1807, in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 15, page 153, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Mathieu Ramis et Agnes Mathieu sa femme*, September 2, 1807, in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 103, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Agnes Mathieu*, September 9, 1808 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 18, page 366, NARC.

[188] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Henry Bricou et Charles Dupart*, May 12, 1806 in Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, page 274, NARC.

[189] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Marie Populus, Rosalie Vincent, et Françoise Populus, femme de Agustin Jean Sernan*, July 17, 1809, in Acts of P.F.S. Godefroy, Volume 2, page 336, NARC.

Perhaps in response to a number of defaults and annulled sales, Marigny began charging eight percent interest in 1809 for late payments after one year.[190] Even then he did not require any money at the time of the sale. These lenient terms appealed to Saint-Domingue refugees from Cuba. Often lacking access to capital, émigrés could acquire a piece of land immediately and then had at least a year to gather the necessary funds to pay off the sale price.

Prompted by the rapid sales and the influx of potential buyers from Cuba, Bernard Marigny decided to turn more of his plantation into urban development. In 1809 he created the "Nouveau Faubourg Marigny" on a swath of land that stretched six blocks towards the lake behind Bons Enfans/St. Claude Avenue. Marigny hired Joseph Pilié to draw a plan for the New Marigny and deposited it with a notary on September 18. The next day he sold the first eighteen parcels. The New Marigny made available 535 additional lots for sale. Although the neighborhood developed more slowly than the Faubourg Marigny, it, too, attracted free black investors. Indeed, ten of the first twelve buyers were free people of color. Marigny's success also encouraged owners of adjacent plantations to subdivide their land into the further downriver faubourgs—Daunois, Montegut, Clouet, Montreuil, and Carraby.[191]

By 1810, a total of 2,228 people lived in the Faubourg Marigny. Free people of color made up forty-three percent of the neighborhood's inhabitants, outnumbering both

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[190] See land sales in acts of N. Broutin, P.F.S. Godefroy, and M. de Armas. The three equal payment plans begin in April 1807. See N. Broutin, Volume 15, page 131, NARC. Marigny started charging interest in May 1809. See P.F.S. Godefroy, Volume 1, page 196, NARC.

[191] *Acte de Dépot du Plan du Sr. B. Marigny en notre Etude*, September 18, Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 2, page 447, NARC; Land sales in Acts of M. de Armas, Volume 2, pages 450- 453, 455- 462, NARC; Wilson, "Early History," 10, 16-17, 20. By the 1830s, the collective area of these additional downriver subdivisions became known as Faubourg Washington. Wilson, "Early History," 22.

white and enslaved residents.[192] Henry Bricou, for example, lived on Français Street. The 1810 Census indicates that Bricou resided amidst twelve households that contained fifty-one free people of color, one white person, and seven enslaved individuals.[193] Bricou's neighbors included early investors like himself, such as Isabelle Sarpy, Auguste Hardy, and Magdeleine Zeringue. Other nearby residents, like Cecile Patus and Louise Picquery, purchased their lots from the initial buyers. Not only were free people of color among some of the first buyers of Faubourg Marigny land, they were also some of its earliest residents.

The 1810 Census points to free people of color living near one another in the Faubourg Marigny. Mapping the initial purchases of lots in the neighborhood indicates a similar pattern among free black buyers. Free people of color selected parcels in squares scattered throughout Finiels' plan, but a clear area of concentration can be discerned when their choices are plotted. (Fig. 6) This area consisted of the top left quadrant of the Faubourg Marigny—roughly bounded by Bons Enfans, Champs Elysées/the Canal, Grands Hommes, and Histoire Streets. The blocks running parallel to the river between Grands Hommes and Craps Street were particularly popular among free black buyers. In 1806, free men and women of color bought every lot except one in the block bounded by Bagatelle, Grands Hommes, Union, and Craps Streets.[194] The following year, however,

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[192] 1810 Census, page 295.

[193] 1810 Census, page 277. For some reason the census does not include every street in the Faubourg Marigny and a number of people listed in the census did not own land on the street where the census listed them. Bricou owned three lots on Craps with Charles Dupart and a single lot on Grands Hommes. None of his neighbors (Sarpy, Hardy, Zeringue, Patus, and Picquery) owned land on Français either. It is unclear why this discrepancy exists.

[194] See sales acts in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 12, pages 258, 260, 265, 267, 269; Volume 13, pages 40, 42, 43, 66; Volume 14, page 63; Volume 15, pages 132, 142, NARC.

the sole white buyer divided his lot in two and sold each half to a free woman of color.[195] Free people of African descent owned almost all of the lots in the next block, as well.[196]

Marie Justine Sirnir's property, on the corner of Grands Hommes and Union, marked a central point in this area of concentration. While many of the properties around her lot changed hands over the early nineteenth century, the location of Sirnir's Faubourg Marigny property served as an anchor for the initial free black investment and settlement. As the neighborhood grew and filled in around it, her lot became a prime location within it.

In addition to its affordability and the opportunity it presented to form clusters among groups of free people of color who already knew each other or who shared émigré status, the Faubourg Marigny had a convenient proximity to the city. By investing there, free men and women of color shrewdly purchased lots that would become a prime area as the suburb developed further downriver. This, however, does not explain why so many free people of color chose the lakeside rather than the riverside quadrant. Broadening the perspective to include the Vieux Carré, this specific area in the Marigny aligned with the section of the French Quarter most heavily populated by free people of color in the early nineteenth century. Across Esplanade Avenue, Grands Hommes and Craps Streets connected to the Vieux Carré thoroughfares of Dauphine and Burgundy Streets, respectively. The back right quadrant of the French Quarter, in general, and those two streets, in particular, housed a large number of free people of color.[197] Thus, free black

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[195] *Vente de terrain par Bernard Marigny à Joseph Valada*, May 12, 1806, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 12, page 269, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Joseph Valada* à Louise Pommette, October 20, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 226, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Joseph Valada à Louise Picquery*, October 20, 1807, Acts of N. Broutin, Volume 17, page 227, NARC.

[196] See sales acts in Narcisse Broutin, Volume 12, pages 251, 253, 268, 284, 288, 289, 291; Volume 13, pages 38-39, NARC.

[197] 1805 City Directory; Edwards, "Shotgun," 77.

landowners extended their claims to space along a familiar axis on the original town grid into the new suburb. (Fig. 7)

Free people of color also made their mark on the neighborhood by the ways in which they built on their lots. As architects, builders, carpenters, joiners, and masons, free men of color physically shaped the landscape. Free women of color, as landowners and clients, aided in this project by making choices about the types and styles of structures built on their property. Building contracts like that between Marguerite Crebs and Jean Baptiste and Cadet Rey illustrate this joint effort. Fashioning the built environment of the neighborhood formed one way in which free people of color created a place out of the urban space of New Orleans.

When Crebs hired the Reys to build her rental house in 1811 she made decisions concerning the layout of the house, the size and number of the rooms, and the materials used. Crebs contracted the builders to construct a house consisting of four rooms, measuring twelve by fourteen feet each. The rear of the house contained a gallery (porch), capped by two rooms on each end, four-feet squared, known as cabinets. Usually enclosed, cabinets could be used as a service or storage space, a child's room, or might contain stairs if a half-story attic space was finished. The contract specified that the house would be made with "bois de chaland" (recycled flatboat planks). The project also included a latrine and well in the courtyard. [198]

The design described in the contract is typical of the early Creole cottages built in the Faubourg Marigny. These houses often contained four rooms assembled in a square, each of equal dimensions, with a rear gallery and two cabinets. The roofs were gable-

[198] *Marché entre Bte Rey et Cadet Rey et Margte Crebs*; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 28, 116; Jay Edwards and Nicolas Kariouk Pecquet du Bellay de Verton, *A Creole Lexicon: Architecture, Landscape, People* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 29.

sided and ran parallel to the street. Referred to as "banquette houses," they were placed right on the edge of the sidewalk (banquette). The front of the house commonly had four openings, a combination of doors and windows covered with shutters, and a short overhang from the roof, called an abat-vent.[199] Creole cottages were well-adapted to a semi-tropical, urban setting. They fit easily on half-lots (30 X 120 French feet) and were built close to one another with small passages to the courtyard between them. Abat-vents shielded both the front of the house and pedestrians from the sun and rain. The cabinet/gallery feature along the back of the house provided "all the adjacent rooms...access to its light and air and, by extension, to the courtyard behind it." Courtyards usually contained service buildings that housed kitchens and other workspaces, as well as slave quarters.[200]

As a type, the Creole cottage predominated in the Vieux Carré, Faubourg Marigny, and Faubourg Tremé. They first appeared in the 1790s, following the 1788 and 1794 fires that destroyed much of the city, and continued to be built into the late nineteenth century.[201] Architect Benjamin Latrobe noted their ubiquitous presence in his 1819 journal, writing, "...beyond Royal street, towards the swamp...[t]he houses are, with hardly a dozen exceptions among many hundred, one-story houses. The roofs are high, covered with tiles or shingles, & project five feet over the footway..."[202] When Latrobe's son visited the city fifteen years later he described a similar sight: "I found

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[199] Roulhac Toledano, Sally Kittredge Evans, and Mary Louise Christovich, "Types and Styles," in Toledano, et.al., *Creole Faubourgs*, 41, 44, 46; Upton, *Another City*, 34-35; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 28; Jay Edwards, "What Louisiana's Architecture Owes to Hispaniola (and what it does not)," *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Summer 1999): 43-44.

[200] Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 26-27, 31-32, quote on 116.

[201] Toledano, Evans, and Christovich, "Types and Styles," 41; Upton, *Another City*, 34-35; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*; Edwards, "What Louisiana's Architecture Owes to Hispaniola," 43; Edwards, "Shotgun," 64.

[202] Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, 105.

entire Squares...without a single two story building but composed of rows of one storied dwellings with sheds projecting from the eves over the pavements."[203] In the 1830s larger Creole cottages began to replace smaller ones, but maintained the same basic structure.[204]

The popularity of Creole cottages likely stemmed, in part, from the type's simple, yet flexible plan. The number of rooms, cabinets, and front openings could be altered to fit the occupants' needs. Four-room houses could be single- or multi-family dwellings. Crebs, for example, may have divided her rental house between two sets of tenants or she may have lived in two rooms, while renting the other two out. Within the house, the utilization of the rooms could be arranged according to the tastes of the occupant.[205] Benjamin Latrobe discerned a cultural divide among "Creoles" and "Americans" in their manner of living within these hall-less cottages. The rooms, he explained, "on one side are the dining & drawing rooms, the others, the chambers. The front rooms, when inhabited by Americans, are the family rooms, & the back rooms the chambers."[206] The American orientation produced a public front on the street and a private back on the courtyard. The Creole arrangement oriented the house towards the rear while permitting access to both the street and courtyard without passing through the bedrooms. This latter layout, moreover, worked well for rental properties.

Cottages also could be constructed to fit the unusual shape of some lots found in the Faubourg Marigny. One such innovation was a hipped-roof variety, usually placed on a corner. In 1820, for example, free black artisan-solider, Jean Louis Dolliole, built a

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[203] Samuel Wilson, ed., *Southern Travels: Journal of John H. B. Latrobe, 1834* (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection, 1986), 48.

[204] Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 27; Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 31.

[205] Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 27, 33-35; Toledano, Evans, and Christovich, "Types and Styles," 47, 52, 54-55.

[206] Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, 106.

house on lot no. 150, where Bagatelle, Paix, and Bourbon Streets came together. Dolliole creatively responded to the odd contour of the intersection by orienting the house on the corner with three openings on each façade and a double-pitched hipped roof that provided an overhang on the sides facing the street. According to Sally Reeves, Dolliole "was responsible for some of the characteristic houses of the creole faubourgs, and well may have contributed to the refinement of the four-bay, hip-roof cottage so often admired."[207]

Creole cottages blended African and European elements, filtered through Caribbean styles, and adapted to New Orleans' environment.[208] Jay Edwards argues that free men of color from Saint-Domingue played a central role in disseminating specific house types in the city, including the Creole cottage and the linear cottage or maisonette. A prototype to the shotgun house, a linear cottage was only one room wide and two or more rooms deep with a hipped roof that ran perpendicular to the street.[209] Although not all architectural historians agree with Edwards' assessment, it is difficult to imagine Saint-Domingue builders completely abandoning the styles and techniques they had utilized on the island.[210] It is more likely that Jean Baptiste and Cadet Rey, for instance, brought their knowledge of design and construction methods to bear on projects like

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[207] Evans, "Free Persons of Color," quote on 32; Toledano, Evans, and Christovich, "Types and Styles," 41-42; Toledano, Evans, and Christovich, "Architectural Inventory," in Toledano, et. al, *Creole Faubourgs*, 95. The house still stands today at 1436 Pauger.

[208] Upton, *Another City*, 35; Edwards, "What Louisiana's Architecture Owes to Hispaniola," 40, 43-44.

[209] Edwards, "What Louisiana's Architecture Owes to Hispaniola," 43; Edwards, "Shotgun," 66, 69-70, 73-74, 78, 85-86.

[210] Edwards' argument concerning linear cottages as prototypes of shotguns and the role of Saint-Domingue free men of color in establishing this type of house in New Orleans builds on the work of John Michael Vlach. Challenging Samuel Wilson's earlier theory of shotgun houses as antebellum adaptations to New Orleans' long, narrow lots, Vlach argued that this style of house originated in West Africa, mixed with indigenous and European styles in Saint-Domingue (the *ti kay* house in Haiti) and was transferred to New Orleans by Saint-Domingue refugees of African descent. The issue is that there is not a lot of evidence of shotguns in New Orleans prior to 1840. Thus, some architectural historians in the city do not find Vlach's theory valid. Edwards, however, has utilized a broader set of sources than just notary records/building contracts to argue for viewing several types of structures, which he refers to generally as "linear cottages" as "progenitors of the shotgun house prior to 1840." See Edwards, "Shotgun," 64-70.

Marguerite Crebs' rental house, adjusting them accordingly to best suit both the setting and their client. Crebs, who was a native of Mobile but a long-time resident of New Orleans, presumably had her own ideas about the type of house she wanted constructed on her property.[211] The building contract captures one example of the interactions between free black Saint-Dominguans and New Orleanians as well as between women and men that left a distinct aesthetic stamp on the Faubourg Marigny.

Such negotiations between builders and their clients affected the development of the Faubourg Marigny. Lines of influence and synthesis also ran among free men of color builders through interaction, collaboration, and competition. Saint-Domingue émigrés and New Orleanians learned from one another and improved upon each other's styles and techniques. Skilled builders like Jean Louis Dolliole and the Reys were joined by numerous other free men of color in the construction trades who participated in the sculpting of New Orleans.

As they constructed the city, the carpenters also constructed a community. Like the Reys, some were Saint-Domingue refugees or the children of refugees such as Nelson Fouché, a mason, and his architect son, Louis Nelson Fouché.[212] Others were New Orleans natives like Jean Louis Dolliole, including his brother, Joseph Dolliole, Henry Fletcher, Ursin Guesnon, and Bernard Couvent *fils*.[213] These men lived, worked, and

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[211] Marguerite Crebs was married to Jean Baptiste Deflandres, a white native of New Orleans, whose family also came from Mobile. They had eight children in New Orleans between 1795 and 1811. Crebs died in 1814. See Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 7:86; 8:89; 10:122; 11:116.

[212] *Nelson Fouche hdcl cont. son Mariage Fran.s Lefevre fdcl*, January 28, 1832, Acts of M. Lafitte, Volume 24, page 5, NARC; Paxton's City Directory 1823; New Orleans Directory, S.E. Percy and Co., 1832; 1842 City Directory; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 16:164; 1850 Census; Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 32-33. In her discussion of "Louis Nelson Fouché," Evans (Reeves) confuses father and son, describing them as the same person.

[213] Evans, "Free Persons of Color," 32-33; City Directories for the years 1822, 1823, 1824, 1830, 1832, 1838, and 1842, all on microfilm at HNOC; *Contrat de batisse Couvent fils (B.d) & Alexis (Adelphin) avec Galabert (B.my)*, August 9, 1838, Acts of J. Cuvillier, Volume 18, page 141, NARC.

owned property in the Faubourg Marigny and the Faubourg Tremé. They interacted as neighbors, business associates, and likely as co-workers on jobs. Henry Fletcher and Joseph Dolliole briefly ran a carpentry business together on Fletcher's Histoire Street property. Although the partnership eventually dissolved, Dolliole and Fletcher remained close associates. Both Joseph and his brother, Jean Louis, witnessed Fletcher's marriage to Heloise Laville in 1827. Almost two decades later, Fletcher named Jean Louis as executor in his will while Joseph appraised Fletcher's estate in 1853, following his friend's death.[214]

Henry Fletcher owned seven pieces of land when he died, four of which were in the Marigny.[215] He initially invested in the suburb in 1812. On May 26, Fletcher partnered with another free man of color named Pierre Janot to buy lot no. 169 on Grands Hommes Street, located almost directly across the street from Sirnir's corner property. Janot and Fletcher eventually split the lot in two and sold both halves.[216] In 1818, Fletcher bought a portion of lot no. 146 on Histoire Street. The odd-shaped lot was less than two blocks away from Sirnir's Marigny land. Fletcher lived at this location until his

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[214] 1822 City Directory; 1824 City Directory; *Marriage Contract Henry Fletcher with Heloise Laville*, October 19, 1827, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 21, page 308, NARC; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 17:153, 233; Inventory and Estate of Hy Fletcher, October 17, 1853, Acts of A. Chiapella, Volume 33, Act 790, NARC. The other appraiser was François Escoffié, who also served on the first Board of Directors for the Catholic Institution. When Fletcher died his will could not be located so his friend, Joseph Decoudreau, acted as administrator of the estate. The testament was later located and it was determined that Fletcher named Jean Louis Dolliole as his executor. See *Succession of Henry Fletcher, f. m. c., Celeste Baham, et al. v. Joseph Decoudreau, Administrator*, January 28, 1856, Supreme Court of Louisiana, New Orleans, 11 La. Ann. 59; 1856 La. Lexis.

[215] Inventory and Estate of Hy Fletcher, October 17, 1853. In addition to the four lots in the Faubourg Marigny, Fletched owned one lot in the New Marigny, one in Tremé, and one on Barracks Street. Fletcher inherited half of the Barracks Street property from his mother and purchased the other half from his aunt. See [Sale of land], March 26, 1818, in Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 3, page 181, NARC.

[216] *Vente de terrain par Charles Vivant à Henry Fletcher et Pierre Janot*, May 26, 1812, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 65, page 287, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Henry Fletcher et Magdeleine Voisin à Noel Bonnepas*, December 30, 1813, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 76, page 510, NARC; *Vente de terrain par Henry Fletcher à Sophie Benedicte,* November 15, 1815, Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, Volume 71, page 975, NARC.

death thirty-five years later. He added to the property over the years with the help of his wife, Heloise Laville. In 1828, Laville bought pieces of the adjoining lot no. 177 so that the couple owned a sizeable piece of real estate on Histoire.[217]

Carpenters and builders like Fletcher often became investors in the faubourgs. On November 23, 1835 Fletcher bought lot 310 on Bons Enfans Street in the New Marigny for $4300. The lot contained two houses and "other buildings."[218] The following February, Fletcher sold half of the lot to a free black woman named Françoise Prieto alias Don Juan for $1200. He then sold the other half of the property to a white man named Charles Urquhart for $3500 in 1837.[219] Fletcher earned a $400 profit on the original purchase. Bernard Couvent *fils* also invested in land in developing areas. In 1835 he purchased a lot located "between the city and Bayou St. Jean" in an area "to be incorporated into the city." [220] Couvent *fils* was one of fifty original buyers to invest in the Faubourg Gueno, created between Tremé and the New Marigny. Despite its large size, the undeveloped lot only cost $70. [221] On August 3, 1836, Couvent *fils* sold the lot to fellow builder Nelson Fouché for $100.[222] Developed areas closer to the city could provide decent-sized profits, but they required much more capital. Areas in the earliest phase of development cost much less, but even these lots turned a profit.

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[217] *Vente de portion de terrain par Bap.te Hardy h.d.c.l. à Henry Fletcher h.d.c.l.,* April 30, 1818; Sale Baptiste Maxent to Henry Fletcher, February 1, 1827, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 20, No. 1, page 62, NARC; Sale Marie T. Zabeth to Heloise Laville wife of Henry Fletcher, April 7, 1828.

[218] [Sale of land], November 23, 1835, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 50, page 304, NARC.

[219] [Sale of land], February 13, 1836, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 52, page 383, NARC; [Sale of land], February 15, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 57, page 202, NARC.

[220] *Vente de terre par la succession de Dame Veuve Guino à Bernard Couvent*, June 20, 1835, Acts of O. de Armas, Volume 25, act 286, NARC.

[221] Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé*, 38; *Vente de terre par la succession de Dame Veuve Guino à Bernard Couvent*, June 20, 1835. The lot measured 128 X 92 X 157' 10'' in French feet.

[222] *Vte de lot de terre par Bernard Couvent à Nelson Fouché*, August 3, 1836, Acts of A. Ducatel, Volume 2, page 226, act 274, NARC.

The business connections between Bernard Couvent *fils* and Nelson Fouché extended beyond this one transaction. In February 1836, Couvent *fils* bought a lot in the newly-created Faubourg Franklin from Nelson Fouché and his co-investor, Joseph Dolliole (Henry Fletcher's former carpentry business partner).[223] The following month, Couvent bought a second lot in the Faubourg Franklin from Fouché for $100.[224] When Fouché bought the Faubourg Gueno lot from Couvent *fils* in August 1836 for $100 the men essentially exchanged one lot for the other. Fouché, in fact, endorsed the notes that Couvent *fils* originally used to pay for the Gueno lot.[225] Although these transactions do not reveal the extent of their relationship, it is clear that Bernard Couvent *fils* and Nelson Fouché had more than a one-time interaction.

Free black builders participated in the real estate market not only as investors, as the above examples show, but also as developers. The two lots purchased by Couvent *fils* in the Faubourg Franklin were part of larger sets of land that Fouché and Dolliole bought from Nicolas Noel Destréhan in 1835.[226] The Faubourg Franklin derived from plantation land owned by Destréhan, situated behind the Faubourg Marigny and on the downriver side of the New Marigny.[227] Fouché and Dolliole bought eight lots in square 102 and all of square 148, cut into twelve lots. After acquiring the land in square 102, Fouché and

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[223] *Vente de terrain par J.h Dolliole et Nelson Fouché à Bern.d Couvent*, February 11, 1836, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 14, act 69, NARC.

[224] *Vente de terrain par Nelson Fouché à Bern.d Couvent*, March 3, 1836, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 14, act 122, NARC.

[225] *Vente de terre par la succession de Dame Veuve Guino à Bernard Couvent*, June 20, 1835.

[226] *Vente de terrains par Destréhan à Nelson Fouché et Joseph Dolliole*, May 2, 1835, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 12, act 277, NARC; *Vente de terrains par Destréhan à Nelson Fouché*, May 7, 1835, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 12, act 299, NARC. These are just two of several purchases from Destréhan made by Fouché, alone, and Fouché and Dolliole together. See Acts of T. Seghers for 1835 and 1836 (volumes 11-17).

[227] The Faubourg Franklin was the area bounded by present-day St. Claude Avenue, Franklin Avenue, Florida Avenue, and Elysian Fields. It is the neighborhood known as St. Roch today. See Charles Zimpel, *Topographical Map of New Orleans and its Vicinity*, c. 1833, Maps from the Historic New Orleans Collection, accessed March 3, 2015, http://hnoc.minisisinc.com/thnoc/catalog/1/7999.

Dolliole devised a new arrangement for the parcel, turning eight lots into nine. Couvent *fils* purchased lot no. 3 in the new configuration.[228] The lot he bought from Fouché in March 1836 was located in square 145, the entirety of which Fouché had acquired from Destréhan in 1835.[229] Thus, Nelson Fouché and Joseph Dolliole bought property in the Faubourg Franklin in bulk, developed the lots, and then sold them individually for a profit. Couvent *fils* and Henry Fletcher also partook in land speculation, just one a smaller scale. Couvent, for example, went on to sell lot no. 3 to Marie Lavespère, a free woman of color, in 1837 for more than twice what he originally paid Dolliole and Fouché for it.[230]

Free men of color did not have to be involved in the building trades to appreciate the potential rewards of land speculation. In fact, a few free men of color became quite wealthy through real estate investments. One such man was François Lacroix, a merchant tailor who owned properties throughout the city but invested heavily in the creole faubourgs. As one scholar explains, "In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it would have seemed virtually impossible to trace a route through New Orleans without traversing at least one Lacroix property."[231] Lacroix lived on Amour Street in the Faubourg Marigny. His brother, Julien Adolphe, lived nearby on Frenchman Street, where he ran a high-end dry goods shop. Julien Adolphe's real estate portfolio rivaled that of his brother's. In 1857, he sold François seventy-five pieces of property, but he continued to own over forty lots when he died in 1868, leaving behind an estate worth

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[228] *Vente de terrains par Destréhan à Nelson Fouché et Joseph Dolliole*, May 2, 1835; *Vente de terrain par J.h Dolliole et Nelson Fouché à Bern.d Couvent*, February 11, 1836; Plan by L. Surgi, June 28, 1835, attached to *Vente de terrain par J.h Dolliole et Nelson Fouché à William Lewis*, December 29, 1835, Acts of T. Seghers, Volume 13, act 777, NARC.

[229] *Vente de terrain par Nelson Fouché à Bern.d Couvent*, March 3, 1836.

[230] *Vente de terre B.d Couvent à Marie Lavespère*, April 7, 1837, Acts of L. T. Caire, Volume 58A, act 439, page 380, NARC.

[231] Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 112.

$128,842.[232] In the 1830s and 1840s, François Lacroix partnered with Étienne Cordeviolle in the tailoring business. According to an advertisement, their shop contained "The most elegant and fashionable articles pertaining to the Gentleman's Wardrobe, Imported, And constantly on hand."[233] The partnership also earned considerable sums through investments in land as speculators and landlords. By 1856, Lacroix's holdings amounted to a value of more than $250,000. Secondary sources often refer to François Lacroix as the richest free man of color in New Orleans.[234]

Family Friends and Founding Fathers

In 1847 a group of ten free men of color incorporated as a society to establish and administer *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* in fulfillment of Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's bequest. The men were literate property owners. They ran businesses and were skilled artisans. Most of these men lived in the Faubourg Marigny. Together, they formed the first Board of Directors for the school with François Lacroix as president, Barthélemy Rey as secretary, and Etienne Cordeviolle as treasurer.[235] According to Desdunes, these men were in "complete ignorance with regards to Mme. Couvent" until Father Maenhaut drew them together and informed them about Sirnir and

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[232] Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 112; Evans, "Free People of Color," 34-36; 1842 City Directory; 1851 City Directory.

[233] Billhead for Cordeviolle & Lacroix, Fashionable Merchant Tailors in *The World of François Lacroix*, online exhibit, New Orleans Public Library, accessed March 4, 2015, http://www.neworleanspubliclibrary.org/~nopl /exhibits/lacroix/candl1.htm.

[234] Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 114; "Introduction," *The World of François Lacroix*, accessed March 4, 2015, http://www.neworleanspubliclibrary.org/~nopl/exhibits/lacroix/title.htm. For sources that describe Lacroix's wealth see Evans, "Free People of Color," 34; Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*, 118; David Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History* 40 (August 1974): 432.

[235] *Incorporation de la "Société Catholique pour l'instruction des Orphelins dans l'indigence,"* April 20, 1847, Octave de Armas, Volume 40, Act 85, NARC; *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents encoignure Grands Hommes et Union Troisième Municipalité, Nouvelle-Orleans* (New Orleans: Maitre Desarzant, 1847), Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Louisiana Collection, Tulane University; 1842 City Directory; 1851 City Directory; 1850 Census.

her bequest.[236] Given the interconnections among free men of color who lived and worked in the Faubourg Marigny, Desdunes' claim seems unlikely. While the following chapter examines the founding of the school in 1847, this chapter concludes by briefly illustrating the overlap in two significant groups of free men of color through which the realization of Simir's bequest became possible.

The ten men who founded *L'Institution Catholique* were not the only group of free men of color who came together in a legal capacity vis-à-vis Simir's last wishes. On September 6, 1837, Henry Fletcher petitioned the Court of Probates to call a family meeting to decide upon a tutor and undertutor for Seraphine's young daughter, Ezaline Bernard.[237] As a minor, Ezaline required the appointment of a tutor to manage her interest in the Barracks Street property which she had inherited with her brother Sanon from Simir.[238] Family meetings usually included male relatives of the minor, but Ezaline had none other than Sanon. In lieu of family members, Fletcher asked the court to approve seven free men of color to attend the meeting: Jean Louis Dolliole, Joseph Dolliole, Joseph Decoudreau, Louis Ferrand *fils*, Nelson Fouché, Fifi Poupono, and Adolphe Duhart. These men, "all friends of the within named minor" would gather "to give their opinions on the nomination of a discreet and responsible person to be appointed tutor to said minor, and another to be her undertutor."[239] The court approved Fletcher's petition and the family meeting convened on September 21, 1837.

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[236] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 142.

[237] *Petition of Henry Fletcher, fmc, to the Honorable Court of Probates*, September 6, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, page 409A, NARC.

[238] According to the Louisiana Civil Code of 1838, female minors under the age of twelve must be appointed a tutor. Tutors administer the minor's estate and represent her/him in civil acts. The undertutor acts for the minor when the interest of the minor conflicts with that of the tutor. See *Civil Code*, Book 1, Title VIII, Chapter 1, Section 6, Article 301and Section 10, Article 327, page 44, 47.

[239] *Family Meeting for Ezaline Bernard*, September 21, 1837, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 56, page 408, NARC.

On that day, the family friends arrived at the notary office of Carlile Pollock to choose a tutor and undertutor for Ezaline. "[H]aving maturely deliberated on the matter so to them submitted" the men "declared that they are unanimously of opinion that Thomas Bernard of this city f. m. of c. natural brother of said minor is a fit and proper person to be appointed" as Ezaline's tutor. Due to the formal setting of these legal proceedings, they referred to Sanon by his baptismal name. For undertutor, the group decided upon Auguste Theodore, a free black wheelwright who lived in the Faubourg Marigny.[240]

Henry Fletcher chose men from his social and economic circle to determine Ezaline's tutor and undertutor. Shared occupations, military service, business associations, and social obligations like witnessing weddings and wills or serving as godfather and as testamentary executors connected these men to each other. Much like the Board of Directors, the men at the family meeting were literate property owners, and most were involved in the building trades. As we have seen, builders Jean Louis and Joseph Dolliole were close to Fletcher, and all three served in the First Battalion. Joseph Decoudreau also had strong social ties with Fletcher, referring to himself in one notary record as Fletcher's friend. Like Fletcher and the Dolliole brothers, Decoudreau was a carpenter who lived in the Faubourg Marigny.[241] Fifi Poupono was a master joiner and cabinetmaker, who taught several free black apprentices, including orphans.[242] Nelson Fouché, discussed above, worked as a mason and builder in the Marigny. Both Fouché and Adolphe Duhart were the children of Saint-Domingue refugees, born in Jamaica and

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[240] *Family Meeting for Ezaline Bernard*, September 21, 1837.

[241] Inventory and Estate of Hy Fletcher, October 17, 1853; 1850 Census; Force, "The House on Bayou Road," 36.

[242] *Apprenticeship Louis Monié to Fifi Pouponne*, August 26, 1829, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 26 (Jan-Dec 1829), page 322, NARC; 1822 City Directory; 1823 City Directory; 1842 City Directory.

Cuba, respectively.[243] Louis Ferrand *fils* was born in Port-au-Prince and served in the Second Battalion.[244] The Dollioles and Decoudreau, like Fletcher, were all native New Orleanians whose family connections to the city went back to the eighteenth century.[245] Together, these men represented leaders among free people of color and point to associations formed between New Orleanians and Saint-Dominguans.

The family meeting for Ezaline offered an opportunity for knowledge of Sirnir's philanthropic bequest to circulate among a group of prominent free men of color and from there flow out into the community at large.[246] Although evidence that the bequest was discussed among the family friends does not exist, it is feasible to imagine that Sirnir's idea for a school would surface in such a context where her succession was discussed and among this group of men, many of whom lived, worked, and/or owned property in the Marigny. Fletcher, of course, knew about the bequest as Sirnir's executor. In addition to Fletcher, the three witnesses to the will—all free men of color—would have heard the bequest when the will was recorded in 1832. One of the witnesses was Joseph Camps, who served in the First Battalion with Fletcher and the Dollioles and was related by marriage to Joseph Decoudreau.[247] Both Camps' son, Joseph Manuel, and his nephew/godson, Paul Trevigne *fils*, went on to teach and serve on the board of directors

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[243] Nola, *Sacramental Records*, 15:166, 240; Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 18, 1828-1829 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2003), 55, 133.

[244] Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 13:165, 293; Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 45.

[245] Evans, "Free People of Color," 32; Toledano and Christovich, *Faubourg Tremé*, 91-92; Force, "The House on Bayou Road," 32-36.

[246] My thinking about how the information concerning Sirnir's bequest circulated among these networks has been influenced by Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties,"*The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360-1380.

[247] Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*, 21. Camps was the half-brother of Paul Trevigne, *pere*, who married Joseph Decoudreau's sister, Josephine. See *Josef Maria Camp, quarteron libre*, December 27, 1791, in St. Louis Cathedral Records, page 197, no. 167, accessed May 28, 2014, http://archives.arch-no.org /documents/SFPC /1786-1792/St.%20Louis%20Cathedral, %20New %20Orleans, %20Baptism,%201786-1792.pdf; Force, "The House on Bayou Road," 40.

for the Catholic Institution.[248] Thus, free people of color did not need to rely solely on Father Maenhaut to learn of Sirnir's donation of her Faubourg Marigny land for a school. This information likely flowed through these networks of artisans, veterans, neighbors, and property owners, activated by Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent when she chose Henry Fletcher as her testamentary executor.

Yet it is more than just mere speculation to point to a connection between the friends of the family and the founders of the school. At least one man involved in the establishment of *L'Institution Catholique* in 1847 was also present at Ezaline's family meeting a decade earlier. Nelson Fouché, the mason who expanded into house-building and land development, signed the incorporation document for the Catholic Institution and served on the inaugural Board of Directors.[249] Fouché resided in the Faubourg Marigny and had direct ties with Henry Fletcher and Bernard Couvent *fils*. Thus, Fouché served as a bridge between the two groups. Adolphe Duhart did not sign the record of incorporation, but Desdunes includes him among the list of "patriots" who carried out Sirnir's bequest. Duhart's wife, Françoise Palmyre Brouard, taught female students at the school when it first opened.[250] The Duharts had two sons who also had connections with the school after the Civil War. Pierre Adolphe Duhart was a writer who served as principal of the Catholic Institute. Armand Duhart owned a printing business and served on the school's Board of Directors in the 1880s. The Duharts' tenure at *L'Institution Catholique* coincided with that of Fouché's son, Louis Nelson Fouché, who taught at the

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[248] *Amendemens à de Charte de la Société Catholique pour l'instruction des orphelins dans indigence*, November 18, 1865, Acts of O. de Armas, Volume 81, Act 77, NARC; "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute," published by the Board of Directors, 1916, in St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish Records, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, hereafter, ARC; Nolan, *Sacramental Records*, 16:387; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 141; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 125.

[249] *Incorporation de la Société Catholique*, April 20, 1847.

[250] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 29; *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique.*

school.[251] As we will see in the next chapter, this cohort formed the next generation of leaders for the free people of color community in New Orleans.

In sum, familial, business, and spatial proximity created a meshwork of "place" in the Marigny. It is easy to become lost in the complexity of these interconnections, but together they make plain that Marie Justine Sirnir, via her property ownership and enduring relationships with those in the neighborhood, had ample opportunity to take stock of its needs and to decide how she could contribute to its future after her death. Further, she selected an executor, Henry Fletcher, as well as witnesses for her second will who were integral parts of this network of relationships. Thus, they were not only people who would be aware of the needs of free people of color in New Orleans in general, but also stakeholders in the Marigny itself, optimally positioned to see to it that her vision for a school for was realized. Not surprisingly, given the gender biases of the time and the power of the Church, most of the credit for founding the school had shifted to Father Maenhaut in Rodolphe Desdunes' 1911 account. The evidence from Sirnir's own lifetime, however, weighs in heavily against this view. By tracing the social networks among free people of color through notary documents and sacramental records it becomes clear that Sirnir and her bequest were not an unknown entity until revealed by a white priest but rather a contributing member of a free black community built within a developing city.

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[251] Charles Nolan, ed., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 19, 1830-1831 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 2001), 126; 1861 City Directory; Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 93-94, 141, 145.

CHAPTER SIX
Articulating a Vision: Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's Legacy

They say that one must always go back to the source of things. According to this principle, all of the good that the Creole population has drawn from the École des Orphelins, it owes to the generosity of this African woman: Widow Bernard Couvent.
- Rodolphe Desdunes, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, 1911

It's because of Marie Couvent that there is still a school here more than 150 years after her death.
- Beverly Kilbourne, Director of Development, Bishop Perry Middle School, 1999

On November 12, 1832, Marie Justine Sirnir recorded the second and what would be the final version of her will. The seventy-five-year-old widow dictated her last wishes to the notary in the presence of three witnesses while sick in bed. After doling out various sums of money and property to family and friends, Sirnir made a bold bequest: "I wish and ordain that my land at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union streets be forever dedicated and employed for the establishment of a free school for the orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny[.]" In an effort to guarantee the creation of a school and its continuous existence on her land, Sirnir placed it under the auspices of the Catholic Church. She named Father Constantine Maenhaut as the supervisor, "and in the case of his death or absence it will be under the supervision of his successors in office." Then, reiterating her desire that a school always remain on the property, Sirnir concluded, "I intend that the said land and buildings will never be sold under any pretext whatsoever, but rather all improvements and additions that time and the number of orphan children may require will be made by subscription or other means." When she finished her dictation, the notary read the will "in a loud and intelligible voice" and Sirnir approved its

contents. She "made her ordinary mark" next to the notary and witnesses' signatures with an X.[1]

Despite being unable to sign her own name, Sirnir understood the importance of education and envisioned her land utilized for that purpose. She left a legacy that was material as well as conceptual. Sirnir donated her most valuable piece of property in the heart of the Faubourg Marigny to provide a space for a school. She also developed a specific idea of the type of school to be created on her land—one that would serve the most vulnerable segment of her community, provide an education at no cost, and have connections to the Catholic Church. She insisted, moreover, that a school permanently exist at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets. Through her forward-thinking bequest, Marie Justine Sirnir endowed future generations of children with an education.

More than just a charitable donation, Sirnir's bequest was a profoundly political act. Restricting black people's access to knowledge played a key role in ensuring white hegemony in New Orleans' slave society. Both whites and blacks understood the potential liberating effects of knowledge from the subordination that people of African descent experienced on a daily basis. Through social convention and eventually the law, whites prevented all but a few enslaved African Americans from learning how to read and write. Teaching free people of color remained legal, but access to schools was limited, especially for poor children. Sirnir's decision to leave her property for a school implicitly recognized this link between power and education.[2] Indeed, her desire that the school exist in perpetuity anticipated the on-going struggle of African Americans to gain access to education in New Orleans long after slavery ended.

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[1] *Testament*, 1832.

[2] Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press*, 2005), 5, 7, 13-14.

As a bequest, however, Sirnir's mandate required the efforts of other people to bring it to fruition. A group of free men of color, led by the wealthy entrepreneur François Lacroix, put Sirnir's last wishes into effect when they founded *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* in 1847.[3] The Catholic Institution, or the Couvent Institution, as it was as also known, quickly became the leading school for free black children in the decade before the Civil War. The school was connected to the Catholic Church, but educated free men and women of color staffed and managed it. The Catholic Institution drew boys and girls from all over the city. Orphans and poor students attended for free, while others paid a monthly tuition.[4] Rodolphe Desdunes, a former student and member of the school's board of directors, described the Catholic Institution as "the best school to attend during the time of slavery."[5]

The corner of Grands Hommes and Union, now Dauphine and Touro Streets, remained a site for African American education long after slavery's demise. In 1994 the Society of St. Edmund, a Catholic religious order, opened Bishop Perry Middle School in the former Holy Redeemer Elementary School building on the land that once belonged to Marie Justine Sirnir. Bishop Perry offered a free education to African American middle-school-age boys whose family incomes fell below the poverty line. Although the students were not orphans, the school certainly served a highly vulnerable population in New Orleans. With its stated mission to support and educate poor African American youth through a free Catholic school, Bishop Perry Middle School brought Sirnir's vision for her property full-circle.

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[3] *Incorporation de la "Société Catholique pour l'instruction des Orphelins dans l'indigence,"* April 20, 1847, Acts of O. de Armas, Volume 40, Act 85, NARC.

[4] Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 17; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 141, 143, 145.

[5] Rodolphe Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 141.

This chapter traces the history of the school from its founding as *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* in 1847 to its twenty-first century iteration as Bishop Perry Middle School, which closed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Rather than one continuous institution, four schools have technically existed on the property bequeathed by Sirnir. In most cases, financial distress led to a reorganization of the school's administration. While such changes often resulted in a new name, each of the schools acknowledged "the Widow Couvent" as the original benefactor. The greater part of the chapter focuses on *L'Institution Catholique*, which existed in this version until 1915. Established to fulfill Sirnir's bequest, the Catholic Institution served as an important crucible of leadership for the Afro-Creole community during a period that spanned the turbulent 1850s, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the dawn of the Jim Crow era. Free people of color and their descendants administered the school during this time. After 1915, the school gradually came under the control of the Catholic Church, but it continued to serve African American children. The various institutions housed on Sirnir's property fulfilled "a very real purpose and need" for people of African descent in New Orleans, as they navigated changes in the city's political landscape over a century and a half.[6]

Creating a Vision or, A Bequest in a Time of Cholera

In *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, Rodolphe Desdunes credits Marie Justine Sirnir with being the first free person of color in New Orleans "to set an example of

[6] Quote in Sister Mary Eugenius Gallaher and the eighth grade students at St. Louis School, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish," 11 April 1976, pamphlet in St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish Records at Amistad Research Center, NOLA; hereafter, ARC.

enlightened charity, and for a long time she was the only one to enjoy that distinction."[7] Desdunes finds this particularly remarkable given that "Mme. Couvent had no schooling." She did, however, "have a sensitive soul," according to Desdunes, which gave her "compassion for these little children condemned to live without the advantages of education, in an environment indifferent, if not hostile, to the fate of an afflicted class."[8] As one of those "little children" to benefit from Sirnir's "compassion," Desdunes aptly captured the political import of Mme. Couvent's bequest. That Desdunes even offered an explanation for Sirnir's bequest is a rare exception in the literature that discusses the school founded on her property. While scholarship on the school always mentions Sirnir and her unique donation, it seldom considers *why* she requested a school be built on her land.[9] Desdunes, in fact, goes on to suggest that Sirnir made her decision upon the advice of Father Maenhaut. While she likely discussed her bequest with the priest, there is no reason to believe Sirnir incapable of coming to the idea on her own. Her vision of a free school for orphans of color contained layers of meaning, filtered through her own past experiences. Bearing in mind those experiences and the particular context in which Sirnir made her bequest highlights the motivations behind her specific intentions for the lot at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets.

Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's bequest for a school indicates that she valued education. Although she never signed her own name on a notary record, Sirnir's business experience suggests that she did have some level of literacy and numeracy. Perhaps because of her own limitations, Sirnir understood the practical benefits of knowing how

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[7] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 139.
[8] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 142.
[9] See for example, Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 17 and Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest*, 123-125. Marcus B. Christian's article, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave," in *Louisiana Weekly* is another source that provides reasons for the bequest.

to read, write, and make calculations. These basic skills allowed for easier and more sophisticated communication, reduced the risk of being taken advantage of in commercial enterprises, and enabled a better understanding of the legal landscape. Literacy also brought awareness to a world beyond the individual and his or her immediate surroundings and offered "a vocabulary" to articulate one's thoughts and feelings.[10] While these types of concerns were shared by many residents in New Orleans, they took on added weight for free people of color. An education, even just the ability to read and write, offered free people of color a way to protect their status and a means with which to contest racial discrimination.

Although limited, educational opportunities did exist for free people of color in New Orleans. During the colonial period, most children, white and black, gained knowledge and professional skills through apprenticeships. Some wealthy white fathers hired private instructors for their free children of color.[11] Enslaved and free girls of color could attend classes conducted by the Ursuline nuns. From their arrival in 1727 until their relocation to a new convent downriver in 1824, the Ursulines accepted free black female students for their day and boarding school and provided religious instruction to enslaved and free black women and girls.[12] As discussed in the previous chapter, Sirnir's close proximity to the Ursulines' convent for almost two decades likely served as a source of inspiration for her own school plan. Shortly before the Ursulines moved, Sister Marthe Fortière of the *Dames d'Hospitalier* arrived to help with their classes for African

[10] Williams, *Self-Taught*, 26.
[11] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 68-69.
[12] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 54, 56-57, 140, 256.

American girls. Fortière remained in the city after 1824 and opened her own school for free girls of color in the Faubourg Tremé.[13]

By the 1820s, the city also contained several private schools "for coloured boys and girls."[14] These small schools, often held in the instructors home, usually cost money to attend. Beyond the options in New Orleans, some free children of color from the wealthiest families traveled to France to attend school.[15] For most free black children, however, access to education was limited by time and money. Free people of color had to have the means to pay for their children's education and be able to afford the loss of labor while their children were in school. While free children of color whose families could afford the time and expense had opportunities to go to school, those without these resources were effectively barred from acquiring a formal education.[16]

In stipulating that the school on her land be free for orphans, Marie Justine Simir sought to broaden opportunities for free children of color whose already limited access to formal instruction was further constrained by a lack of resources. Orphaned children represented those with the least means, suffering the loss of financial support as well as the care and protection of one or both parents. Although orphanages providing assistance and schooling for white children existed at this time, there was no institutional equivalent

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[13] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 128-129; Clark and Gould, "Feminine Face," 441-442. The Ursulines took over the school on two separate occasions in the 1830s. In 1838, the Sisters of Mount Carmel began to administer the school. Henriette Delille, the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family, attended the school as a girl.

[14] 1822 City Directory.

[15] Quote in 1822 City Directory; Donald Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 41.

[16] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 124.

for free black children.[17] Some orphans of color gained training and a basic education through apprenticeships. In August 1829, for example, Louis Monie, a boy who had "neither father[,] mother[,] tutor[,] or curator[,]" was apprenticed to a free black joiner and cabinetmaker named Fifi Pouponne at the request of the mayor. Pouponne promised to teach the child his trade, as well as house, feed, and clothe Monie for three years. He also agreed to teach his apprentice to read, write, and cipher.[18] While girls participated in the apprenticeship system, it was utilized more commonly to train boys in skilled trades.[19] Thus, Sirnir's desire to provide all orphans of color with an education in a school setting at no cost was a novel proposal in New Orleans.

Few secondary sources address why Sirnir chose specifically to help orphans through her bequest. Two scholars suggest that this decision indicates Sirnir's recognition of the challenges faced by the children born of relationships between free women of color and white men.

In his 1938 article, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave," Marcus B. Christian offers two reasons for Sirnir's interest in orphans. Because he believes Sirnir to have been childless, Christian views her interest in parentless children as a symbolic act of motherhood. He also explains that over her many years in New Orleans Sirnir "had seen the terrible want and suffering of little free children of color," adding that "many of these free colored orphans had white fathers."[20] In her study of Creoles of color and Americanization, Shirley Elizabeth Thompson makes obvious that to which Christian's explanation merely

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[17] Priscilla Ferguson Clement, "Children and Charity: Orphanages in New Orleans, 1817-1914," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 27, no. 4, (Autumn, 1986), 338, 340, 342.

[18] *Apprenticeship Louis Monié to Fifi Pouponne*, August 26, 1829 in Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 26, page 322, NARC. Monie had clearly acquired some previous instruction because he signed his name to the apprenticeship contract.

[19] Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana," 737.

[20] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave."

alludes. She claims that Simir "had been concerned about the education and social protection of free children of color without the security of paternal acknowledgement." By this, Thompson specifically refers to mixed-race children with white fathers "whose failure to acknowledge [their] natural children would render them orphans in a figurative if not a literal sense."[21] According to Christian and Thompson, Simir's plan to provide a school for orphans of color in the Faubourg Marigny served as an indictment of New Orleans' racial order that prevented free children of color from fully claiming the rights and privileges accorded legitimate children.

As the mother of a "mulatto" son, Simir likely had some sensitivity toward this issue. Evidence that Simir found the absence of white paternal acknowledgement to be a pressing concern, however, is lacking. Certainly, elements from her own life are reflected in her decision to aid children without parents. Enslaved and transported across the Atlantic as a young girl, Simir may have rightly considered herself an orphan. She then lost contact with her own child in the chaos of war, which made Celestin an orphan. With these experiences of loss and separation in mind, Simir's call for an orphans' school looks less about the recognition denied to free colored children by white fathers and more like an empathetic understanding of the plight of parentless children.

Beyond the resonances from her life, Simir's desire to help orphaned children in New Orleans was a direct response to events that occurred in the fall of 1832. Between October 27 and November 6 of that year, cholera racked the city. The outbreak occurred as part of a world-wide epidemic that moved across Europe from Asia in 1831. It then crossed the ocean on transatlantic ships rendering port cities in the United States especially vulnerable. In June 1832, the disease struck New York City with full force. By

[21] Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 185.

the end of October, cholera had arrived in New Orleans, where it arguably wreaked the most havoc. An estimated 5,000 people died. Most of these deaths occurred in the span of eleven days.[22]

One of the many lives claimed by the epidemic belonged to Seraphine, Sirnir's former slave and close companion. Seraphine succumbed to the disease on November 4. Despite having gained her freedom in 1831, Seraphine's funeral record described her as the forty-year-old "slave of Mme Vve Bernard Couvent, free black woman."[23] Because Sirnir was likely ill herself at this time, it is possible that whoever reported Seraphine's death to the priest failed to provide her recent change in status.[24] As an important member of the family Sirnir created for herself in New Orleans, the loss of Seraphine would have been difficult for Sirnir. Seraphine's passing also left her children without a mother. Eight days after Seraphine's funeral, Marie Justine Sirnir recorded her second will, leaving her house to Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline and her Faubourg Marigny land for an orphans' school.

Nineteenth-century New Orleans was no stranger to deadly epidemics, but the usual cause was yellow fever. In fact, the cholera epidemic followed in the wake of a yellow fever outbreak that killed around 400 people.[25] Cholera, however, was a disease

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[22] Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1, 13, 25, 37; Theodore Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches and Recollections, during a Thirty-Five Years' Residence in New Orleans* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1857), 120.

[23] *Séraphine negresse esclave*, November 4, 1832; [Emancipation of Seraphine by Justine Sirnir widow Bernard Couvent], October 5, 1831, Acts of C. Pollock, Volume 36, page 394, NARC; Probate Court Suit no. 1322, December 15, 1839.

[24] Sirnir was sick when she recorded her second will on November 12, 1832. Witness testimony given in an 1839 probate court case regarding the succession of Ezaline suggests that people who knew Seraphine in 1832 thought she was still enslaved. Henry Fletcher was one of the witnesses in the case and may have been the one who reported Seraphine's death in 1832. See Probate Court Suit no. 1322.

[25] Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 129; Jo Ann Carrigan, *The Saffron Scourge: A History of Yellow Fever in Louisiana, 1796-1905* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1994), 1-2, 31.

new to the West. An infection caused by the bacterium, *Vibrio cholerae*, cholera produces "diarrhea, acute spasmodic vomiting, and painful cramps." The disease spreads by the ingestion of food and water that has been tainted by the bodily fluids of an infected person. An epidemic easily occurs when a city's drinking water has become contaminated in this way. The unsanitary conditions of antebellum New Orleans, like most urban centers at this time, made its inhabitants susceptible to the quick and devastating spread of the disease. Although residents and medical professionals, alike, pointed towards the dirty conditions of urban living as deleterious to their health, they did not understand the cause or transmission of cholera.[26] Believing that "miasmas" in the air generated disease, New Orleans' officials burned pitch and tar and fired cannon on the street corners to "purify the atmosphere."[27] These remedies did nothing but add to the nightmare scenes of death that occurred repeatedly throughout the city.

For those administering to the afflicted, the symptoms of cholera produced an effect that was horrible to witness. The watery diarrhea and vomiting resulted in extreme dehydration. The skin on the face, hands, and feet often turned blue and puckered—a condition called cyanosis, in which the tissues below the skin lack oxygen.[28] In addition to the physical manifestations of the disease, the quickness in which it could kill made it all the more terrifying. Throughout the epidemic, individuals died without warning. Reverend Theodore Clapp, a Unitarian preacher who lived in New Orleans during some of its worst epidemics, including the 1832 cholera outbreak, explained that "[m]ultitudes

[26] Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, quote on 2, 3-4, 75-77.
[27] Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches*, quote on 132; Upton, *Another City*, 55-56.
[28] Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, 2-3.

began the day in apparently good health, and were corpses before sunset."[29] Unlike yellow fever, which more readily affected people newly-arrived to the city, cholera infected natives and immigrants, alike.[30] According to Clapp, entire households, boarding houses, and even a hospital perished.[31]

A survey of the sacramental records for free and enslaved people of African descent suggests the impact of the epidemic on Marie Justine Sirnir's community as well as her household. Between October 27 and November 7, 1832, the priest conducted funerals for 293 black people (compared to only 84 funerals between October 1 and October 26).[32] Although the cause of death was not recorded, it can be surmised that most of these people fell victim to cholera. The disease affected men, women, and children. A five-year-old named Louis Boré was one of several people buried on November 2. The Port-au-Prince native and Second Battalion veteran, Louis Joseph Morin Ferrand, *fils* died on November 9 at the age of sixty. Françoise Populus, the daughter of Second Major Vincent Populus of the First Battalion perished on October 28. The extended Populus family attended another funeral on November 10 for Françoise's aunt, Marie Arthemise Guillory, the wife of Maurice Populus. Some families lost several members at once. Three adult siblings of the Belille family were buried within two days of one another while Edouard Jenkins died the day after losing his son, Julien. Enslaved individuals also

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[29] Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 130. Clapp goes on to list several other examples of people dying suddenly and unexpectedly.

[30] Newcomers to New Orleans were more susceptible to yellow fever than residents born there because mild cases, usually contracted at a young age, created immunity to the disease. See Carrigan, *The Saffron Scourge*, 6.

[31] Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 125, 131.

[32] *St. Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 9, Part 2: 1831-1832, no. 2035- no. 2327, AANO. This period saw the epidemic at its most intense. Between November 8 and November 14 when Volume 9 ends, seventy-nine more people were buried. The total deaths recorded by the Catholic Church for free and enslaved people of color between October 28 and November 14 equals 372.

perished in the epidemic. For example, François, a slave of Honore Destrehan, died on November 9.[33] According to the ledger, Sirnir had two slaves die in the cholera epidemic. One was recently emancipated Seraphine, whom the priest inaccurately described as a slave. Father Moni also buried a male slave named Josué belonging to "Mme Vve Bernard Couvent" on October 29.[34]

These records do not account for everyone who died during the cholera epidemic, however. Henry Fletcher's wife, Heloise Laville passed away on November 3. The Catholic funeral ledger does not include Laville's burial, and the Louisiana Recorder of Births and Deaths Office did not create her death record until December 22, 1834.[35] The circumstances of the epidemic likely explain this two-year delay. The sheer number of deaths that occurred in such a short period caused serious difficulties for health workers, city officials, and spiritual counselors attempting to manage the situation. Reverend Clapp described bodies piled up "like corded wood" in the cemeteries awaiting burial, and explained that "[m]any died of whom no account was rendered."[36]

It was in the midst of this crisis that Marie Justine Sirnir fell ill and recorded her will. The plans she outlined in her testament for her pieces of land respond to her immediate circumstances, both personal and collective. Sirnir witnessed children orphaned within her own household, and the concern she had for Seraphine's children

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[33] *St. Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 9, Part 2: 1831-1832, AANO. For Boré see no. 2205; for Ferrand, *fils* see no. 2345; for Populus see no. 2047; for Juliette, Jean Henry Pierre, and Amélise Belille see nos. 2240, 2241, and 2297, respectfully; for Julien Jenkins see no. 2066; for Edouard Jenkins see no. 2101; for François see no. 2351.

[34] *St. Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, Volume 9, Part 2: 1831-1832, no. 2055, AANO. Additional information concerning Josué, including when and how Sirnir acquired him has yet to be located.

[35] Eloise Laville, December 22, 1834, State of Louisiana, Orleans Parish, Recorder of Births and Deaths Office, Volume 4, page 183, microfilm, NOPL; [Inventory of Heloise Laville], February 20, 1853, C. Pollock, Volume 49, page 44, NARC.

[36] Clapp, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 120, 124.

radiated out to the broader community. Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline were not alone in losing their mother. One consequence of the cholera epidemic was the number of children who lost one or both parents to the disease. Much like the white orphans' asylums founded in response to previous yellow fever epidemics, Sirnir's bequest for a school sought to provide education, support, and protection to an increased population of actual orphans of color.[37]

A Vision Articulated: The Founding of "The Couvent Institution"

With so much death around her, Sirnir likely did not expect to survive the illness from which she suffered in November 1832. She may have contracted a mild case of cholera, especially since both Seraphine and her slave, Josué, died from the disease. Whatever caused her to get sick, Sirnir recovered and lived for another five years. In the summer of 1837, Sirnir once again became ill. She died on June 28 at the age of eighty. Her funeral took place the following day at St. Louis Cathedral.[38] Sirnir was interred in the plot she originally purchased for her husband, located on the center aisle in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2. The celebrated free black sculptor and marble cutter, Florville Foy, built Sirnir's tomb with the inscription: "*ici repose M. Bernard Couvent natif d'Afrique*" (here lies M. Bernard Couvent native of Africa).[39] Sirnir's death meant that her last wishes

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[37] Clement, "Children and Charity," 340. According to Timothy Hacsi, the 1832 cholera epidemic "may have been responsible for the creation of more [orphan] asylums [in the nation] than any other single cause prior to the Civil War." See Hacsi, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24.

[38] Justine Firmin, June 29, 1837, State of Louisiana, Orleans Parish, Recorder of Births and Deaths Office, Volume 6, page 95, microfilm, NOPL; Justine Firmin, June 29, 1837, page 64, no. 329, *St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 Death Records*, January 1837 to December 1837, AANO; [Succession Record for Marie Justine Cirnaire], July 15, 1837, C. Pollock, Volume 56, page 376, NARC.

[39] Expenditures List, Succession of Marie Justine Cirnaire, Succession Records of New Orleans Probate Court, 1824-1842, microfilm, NOPL; Lucille Levy Hutton Papers, Box 22, Folder 1, ARC; Patricia Brady, "Florville Foy," *KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, ed., David Johnson, Louisiana Endowment for the

could finally be executed. Yet, a school would not open on her property for another ten years.

On April 20, 1847, a group of ten free men of color arrived at the notary office of Octave de Armas on Royal Street. They gathered there to legally incorporate "a benevolent association" known as the *Societé Catholique pour l'instruction des Orphelins dans l'indigence*. The purpose of the society was to establish a school "for the instruction of poor children of both sexes" in the Third Municipality. The notary recorded a constitution of seven articles that laid out the powers and responsibilities of the board of directors as well as the annual election process for members. All ten of the original board members signed their name to the icorporation document: François Lacroix, François Escoffié, Martial Dupart, Barthélemy Rey, Chazal Thomas, Joseph Jean Pierre Lanna, Etienne Cordeviolle, Similien Brulé, Joseph Claude Thomas, and Nelson Fouché.[40] As the founders of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents*, these men articulated Marie Justine Sirnir's vision for a school in the Faubourg Marigny.

The board's first order of business took place two days later when they agreed to take possession of the lot at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets "left by the late widow of Bernard Couvent...to establish a free school for the indigent orphans." The board authorized the president, François Lacroix, to accept the property on its behalf from Father Maenhaut. On May 6, 1847, Lacroix and Maenhaut recorded a contract which gave the Catholic Society use of the land. The notary document explained that "today, having learned that an Association has been formed in the Faubourg Marigny,

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Humanities, 2010, http://www.knowla.org/entry/599/; Keith Weldon Medley, "Bishop Perry Middle School: Madame Couvent's Legacy," included in Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan, 1999-2000, unpublished.

[40] *Incorporation de la Societé catholique*, April 20, 1847.

having in view the same work as that expressed in the said will, [Maenhaut] made an agreement with the said association to realize in effect the beneficent intentions of the deceased." Maenhaut agreed to give the society use of the land for a school as long as the students received proper Catholic religious instruction and the society paid all the taxes and expenses for the property's upkeep. Henry Fletcher was present and also signed the contract between Lacroix and Maenhaut.[41]

Because Sirnir placed the school under the supervision of Maenhaut and his successors at the Church, the legal responsibility to carry out the bequest fell on the priest. In the contract, Father Maenhaut explained that "until this day he did not see any possibility to implement the wishes of the testatrix..." In the meantime, Fletcher, as the executor and universal legatee of Sirnir's estate, "had continued until now to enjoy the income of the land in question without Father Maenhaut interfering in the least."[42] By signing the agreement, Fletcher and Maenhaut indicated that possession of the property had passed to the *Société Catholique*. The board members immediately went to work on the school.

The reason Maenhaut found it impossible to fulfill Sirnir's bequest before 1847 remains unclear. Roger Baudier, a historian of Louisiana's Catholic Church, suggests that Maenhaut delayed establishment of the school in order to protect it from the lay wardens who controlled St. Louis Cathedral's finances and properties and approved appointments of cathedral priests. Between 1842 and 1844, the Archbishop Antoine Blanc and the white Creole wardens "engaged in a bitter legal struggle" over the authority to choose

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[41] *Conventions entre Rev.d Maenhaut & La Societé Catholique pour l'instruct.n des orphelins dans l'indigence de la 3.me Muncipalité*, May 6, 1847, O. de Armas, Volume 40, Act 93, NARC.

[42] *Conventions entre Rev.d Maenhaut & La Societé Catholique pour l'instruct.n des orphelins dans l'indigence de la 3.me Muncipalité*, May 6, 1847.

priests for the Cathedral. Blanc's state Supreme Court victory severely diminished the power of the wardens and presumably made it safe for Maenhaut to proceed with establishing a school on Simir's land.[43] The contract between Maenhaut and Lacroix, however, depicts the Society's Board of Directors as the more active party in the founding of *L'Institution Catholique* than the priest.

This is in direct contrast to Desdunes' version of the creation of the Couvent school. In *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, Desdunes states that Father Maenhaut "occupied himself with this particular legacy and made it his duty to conserve it for the Catholic orphans. This good priest, having noticed the negligence in the execution of the will of the deceased, decided to intervene." Maenhaut informed Lacroix and his "friends" about the unfulfilled bequest, and these men organized *L'Institution Catholique* at the priest's behest. Because so much time had passed since Mme. Couvent's death, the society members had to force "the executor to make an account of his administration." Once the land was "restored," the society took possession of the property and opened the school.[44]

The contract signed by Lacroix, Maenhaut, and Fletcher disputes Desdunes' account. By his own admission, Father Maenhaut did not attempt to establish the school, and Lacroix and the other board members acted on their own accord in founding the Society. Rather than deserving praise for intervening on behalf of the unfulfilled bequest, the contract indicates that Father Maenhaut was responsible, at least in part, for the

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[43] Roger Baudier, "Holy Redeemer School is Oldest Catholic One for Negroes in South," *Catholic Action of the South*, 2 December 1956 in Charles B. Rousseve Papers, 1836-1993, Box 11, Folder 5, ARC; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, quote on 64; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest*, 148-152. Despite the ruling, the wardens remained in control of select church properties until 1883.

[44] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 29, 140-141. In an earlier chapter on Armand Lanusse, Desdunes credits Lanusse with leading "the movement" to fulfill Simir's bequest. Desdunes does not mention Maenhaut in this section. See *Nos Hommes*, 29-30.

"negligence" of its execution. Furthermore, Henry Fletcher was well within his rights to utilize the property until the school opened. He did not "misuse" the legacy, as one translated version of Desdunes' book states, nor was he forced by the society to make an account of the property.[45]

Shortly after the *Société Catholique* incorporated, the board published a prospectus that included its mission statement, by-laws, the names of the school's administrators, and the curriculum. The pamphlet also offered an explanation for the delayed response in activating Sirnir's bequest. In the opening paragraph the directors explained, "The needs of society have long demanded an institution set up in a manner solid and lasting, and, dare we say, until this day, a deplorable indifference paralyzed all means to establish it."[46] On one hand, this statement referred to indifference on the part of free people of color, who recognized the need for a permanent school for their children but failed to act. This lack of action may have stemmed, in part, to the economic situation of the late 1830s and early 1840s. To establish a school required physical, financial, and human resources. While Sirnir provided a space for the institution, money for infrastructure and operations and people to teach and oversee the administration had to be assembled. When Sirnir died in June of 1837, New Orleans was experiencing the effects of a nation-wide depression set off by a series of transatlantic financial crises in the

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[45] Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, trans. McCants, 102. Following Fletcher's death in 1853, three separate parties sued his estate, including his cousins, his natural daughter, and Father Duquesnay, Maenhaut's successor at St. Louis Cathedral. Father Duquesnay claimed that the Church was owed rents from Fletcher for the time that he had possession of Sirnir's property before the establishment of the school. The court ruled against the priest, stating "that (1) the contemplated school was not established until a society was formed for that purpose, (2) the curé [priest] named in the testatrix's will ceded to the society the bequeathed property, (3) until the property was ceded to the society, the decedent [Fletcher] was the proprietor of the revenues from the land because the testatrix's will did not expressly declare that they would belong to anyone else, (4) no judicial demand was made for rents until more than nine years after the property was ceded to the society, and (5) the evidence of any oral contract by the decedent to pay the rents was uncertain and inconclusive." See *Succession of Henry Fletcher, f. m. c.--Opposition of Rev. G. J. Duquesnay*, 13 La. Ann. 29; 1858 La. LEXIS 11.

[46] *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique.*

spring of that year. Along with New York and London, the Crescent City was among "the hardest hit" during this period of widespread panic. In May 1837, banks across the country suspended specie payments, which ended the panic but left numerous failed banks and businesses, a high rate of unemployment, and overall deflation in its wake. Although the economy improved some in 1838, it underwent another crisis in 1839. Recovery did not occur until 1843.[47] It is possible that individuals with the means to fulfill Sirnir's bequest soon after her death suffered financial losses during this period.[48] At the very least, an economic depression made founding a school more difficult and less of a priority.

On the other hand, the indifference referred to in the prospectus can also be read as a rebuke of Father Maenhaut, specifically, and white officials, in general, who did not make free black education a main concern. This became apparent during the time that lapsed between Sirnir's death and the founding of *L'Institution Catholique*. In 1841, the city's three municipalities each initiated separate public school systems, following authorization to do so by the state legislature. Although free people of color paid taxes that supported the new public schools in their respective districts, their children were prohibited from attending.[49] With the development of city-sponsored schools for white children, the need for a "solid and lasting" educational facility for free children of color became more pressing. This, perhaps, disrupted the paralyzing indifference among free people of color and compelled them to fulfill Sirnir's bequest through the creation of *L'Institution Catholique*. The school arguably served as a response to the establishment

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[47] Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837*, 3, 137, 190, 230-232; Schweninger, *Black Property Owners*, 112.
[48] Schweninger, *Black Property Owners*, 112, 114.
[49] Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 11, 24-25, 40, 42, 365, n. 30; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 124; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 18; Nathan Willey, "Education of the Colored Population in Louisiana," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 33, no. 125 (July 1866): 247.

of a public school system that denied free black students entrance. Indeed, donors frequently sent their contributions addressed to "*L'Ecole Publique des Orphelins indigents du Troisième district*" (The Public School for Indigent Orphans of the Third District).[50]

By limiting public school access to white children only, city authorities made clear the little regard they held for the well-being of free children of African descent. Yet, whether this indifference translated to outright opposition to the founding of a free black orphans' school, as some secondary sources claim, remains unsubstantiated.[51] A negative reaction by city authorities towards the creation of a free black school following Sirnir's death certainly seems plausible, but evidence suggests otherwise. For one thing, laws did not prohibit teaching free children of color, only enslaved children. As discussed above, schools for free children of color, while limited, did exist in New Orleans prior to and during this time. The *Société Catholique,* moreover, did not attempt to conceal its founding. The Society's incorporation gained approval by the state Attorney General and the Secretary of State registered its official status on May 27, 1848.[52] Meanwhile, the Board of Directors declared its intentions in a published pamphlet. They stated in the prospectus: "Encouraged today by public favor, [and] much eager assistance of the members, our establishment...will provide...to all of the students, an education practical,

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[50] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 18.

[51] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave;" Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 123; Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 42; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 53.

[52] *Incorporation de la Societé catholique*, April 20, 1847. This was in accordance with a law passed in May 1847 concerning the incorporation of literary, benevolent, and religious societies. Cossé Bell suggests that the passage of this law enabled the founding directors create the association, but the law was passed after notary Octave de Armas recorded the incorporation document. Amendments to this law in 1850 and 1855, however, did exclude free people of color from creating such societies. See Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 125-126.

moral, and religious..."[53] In addition, the school received funding from both the state and the city during the early 1850s, indicating, at least on some level, continued "public" approval.[54]

Marcus B. Christian's 1938 "biographical sketch" of Marie Justine Sirnir is one source that cites white resistance to the school as the explanation for the ten-year delay in the execution of Sirnir's will. He writes, "There were white private tutors teaching free colored children and free colored tutors teaching white children; but popular education by and through an established institution for the free people of color was not looked upon with favor by city and state authorities—even when the education was under the supervision of the leading Catholic church of the community."[55] Christian readily admits that educational opportunities existed prior to the founding of *L'Institution Catholique*. Yet, he makes the important point that the school first conceptualized by Sirnir and then articulated by the original Board of Directors was different from the "private tutors" or even parochial schools run by white nuns and priests. A free school that was created, taught, and administered by free people of color for free children of color did not exist before 1847. "In the legacy of Madame Couvent," historian Mary Mitchell writes, "the free people of color in New Orleans seized an opportunity to educate the children of their own race."[56]

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[53] *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique*.

[54] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 141; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 127; Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 42; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 18. This funding was limited and by no means fully covered the expenses of the school. In 1858, the state legislature refused the school its typical allotment. See Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 36. During the Civil War, the directors petitioned for and received financial support from the Bureau of Education. See Willey, "Education of the Colored Population," 248; Robert Meyer, Jr., *Names Over New Orleans Public Schools* (New Orleans: Namesake Press, 1975), 47.

[55] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave."

[56] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 18.

"The Nursery for Revolution in Louisiana"[57]

L'Institution Catholique opened in 1848, enrolling forty-three orphans in its first year. The school also admitted non-orphans, and by 1853 a total of 240 students attended. Free men and women of color taught at the school, including "some of the leading French-speaking free black intellectuals and writers in Louisiana."[58] In the hands of gifted mentors, the institution quickly earned a reputation for the "solid education" it provided students. Once children mastered the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic they turned to more advanced subjects that prepared them for a variety of careers. The students, however, gained more than just "a practical, moral, and religious education" at the Catholic Institute.[59] Through their assignments, the teachers inculcated a distinct political and racial consciousness in their pupils.[60]

Although success marked its first decade of existence, *L'Institution Catholique* operated in an environment increasingly hostile to free people of color. As national debates over slavery intensified, a growing fear of Louisiana's free black population led to a rash of repressive state legislation and increased enforcement of existing restrictions.[61] Protected by its connection to the Catholic Church, the school provided an anchor for the Francophone free people of color community throughout the turbulent 1850s and the upheaval wrought by the Civil War. The political lessons learned at the Catholic Institution before the war proved highly valuable in its aftermath. A number of

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[57] Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 42.

[58] Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 54; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 17, quote on 18.

[59] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 30; *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique*.

[60] Mary Niall Mitchell, " 'A Good and Delicious Country': Free Children of Color and How They Learned to Imagine the Atlantic World in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana," *History of Education Quarterly*, 40, no. 2, 2000: 125-126; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 19.

[61] Robert Reinders, "The Decline of New Orleans Free Negro in the Decade before the Civil War," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 24 (April 1962): 89-91; Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana*, 308.; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 126-127; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 81-82, 87; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 208.

leaders during the Reconstruction period had connections to the school, including teachers, directors, former students, and patrons. These activists helped pass a new state constitution that included integrated public schools.[62]

The school attracted children from all over the city. Although most students came from the Francophone free people of color community that congregated in the surrounding neighborhoods, some of pupils were English-speakers, who mostly lived upriver from Canal Street. Enrollment was open to students of any religious affiliation. Both boys and girls went to the school, but following Catholic tradition, the classes were separated by sex. Adhering to Sirnir's instructions, orphans attended the Catholic Institution for free. Children with parents paid tuition fees based on what they could afford. Some came from poor families while others were the sons and daughters of skilled artisans, property owners, and entrepreneurs.[63]

The education program at *L'Institution Catholique* consisted of six levels of coursework. Classes were taught in French and English. The curriculum provided a well-rounded education with courses in language arts, mathematics, history and geography. Advanced subjects included rhetoric, logic, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, bookkeeping, physiology and hygiene, and drafting for architecture, mapmaking, and machinery. At the completion of the sixth grade, students would be placed in an apprenticeship to learn a trade. The students participated in a public final exam each spring. The Board of Directors explained in the prospectus that they expected students to

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[62] Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 124; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 133; David Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans," 433, 436-440.

[63] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 17-18; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 125; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 54-55; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 125; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*,141; Willey, "Education of the Colored Population," 248. Orphans were sponsored, usually by their tutors or curators. In 1852, Marie Laveau, the free woman of color known today as "the Voodoo Queen" sponsored a boy named François. See Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 53-54.

be able to "apply, in an easy and beneficial manner, the knowledge that they will gain, to industrial enterprises, commerce and the arts." In addition to these career-building goals, the directors aimed to impart a love of learning to the students. The administrators were also sensitive to the needs of children from diverse economic circumstances and built a course of study that suited students who could not attend full time.[64]

The Board of Directors of the *Société Catholique* managed the school. Individuals joined the Society by paying annual dues, and the directors were elected from the body of members. Participating in this process afforded members "a venue for exercising leadership and some form of the elective franchise, both of which were denied them in the larger society."[65] The Society crafted the regulations set forth in its Constitution and any amendments were adopted after a vote. The directors oversaw the staffing of the school as well as student enrollment, discipline, and apprenticeship arrangements. The Board of Directors also handled the school's finances. As an incorporated entity, the Society had the power to buy, sell, and own property.[66] Investment in real estate offered one source of income.[67] While the school did receive some financial support from the Louisiana state legislature, the majority of its funding derived from charitable contributions. The school collected donations and bequests from individual free people of color as well as free black benevolent societies and other organizations. The Catholic

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[64] *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique*; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 125-126.

[65] *Incorporation de la Societé catholique,* April 20, 1847*; Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique*; Ochs, *A Black Patriot,* quote on 54.

[66] *Incorporation de la Societé catholique* , April 20, 1847*; Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique*; Willey, "Education of the Colored Population," 248. The Society periodically made amendments to its Constitution and recorded them with notary Octave de Armas. See, for example, *Amendemens à l'acte d'incorporation de la Société Catholique pour l'instruction des orphelins indigents*, May 16, 1849, O. de Armas, Volume 44, Act 163, NARC; *Amendemens à la Constitut.n de Associat.n Catholique pour l'instruct.n des orphelins dans indigence,* April 15, 1851, O. de Armas, Volume 49, Act 110, NARC.

[67] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 141.The Society purchased property and received it through bequests. This real estate was used as rental property to earn income and as collateral to borrow money. It could also be sold, if needed. See for example, *V.te de propriété par la Société Catholique pour l'instruct.n des Orphelins indigens à Jean Valadie*, December 9, 1865, O. de Armas, Volume 81, Act 101, NARC.

Institution also held fundraising events, including fairs, dances, and annual collections.[68] The school and its attendant society found support in the community it served.

In 1852, the directors hired Armand Lanusse as principal of the school. Born in New Orleans to Saint-Domingue refugee parents, Lanusse was an intellectual, writer, and editor. He served as a leader within the "highly sophisticated literary community" that developed among free men of color in the 1830s and 1840s.[69] Lanusse, along with Joanni Questy, contributed multiple written works and aided in the publication of a literary journal, *L'Album littéraire: Journal des jeunes gens, amateurs de littérature*. The journal debuted in 1843 and featured poetry, fiction, and essays by both free black and white authors. Heavily influenced by French Romanticism, the works offered a commentary on New Orleans' corrupt and discriminatory society and the role of the poet in highlighting social injustice.[70] Following *L'Album*'s brief existence, Lanusse edited a collection of poetry by free men of color, including several of his own pieces. Entitled *Les Cenelles: Choix de Poésies Indigènes*, the anthology appeared in 1845. In the introduction, Lanusse expressed his belief in education as a source of protection, writing: "A good education is a shield against which to blunt the arrows shot at us out of contempt or calumny."[71] Ostensibly "us" referred to young writers, but the implication of Lanusse's message pertained as well to free children of color living in New Orleans on the eve of the Civil

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[68] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 144; Baudier, "Holy Redeemer School"; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 55.

[69] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 17, 30; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 156; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, quote on 98.

[70] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 105-110.

[71] Armand Lanusse, ed., *Les Cenelles: Choix de Poésies Indigènes* (New Orleans, LA: H. Lauve et Compagnie, 1845), quote on 10; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 114-115. *Les Cenelles* is often considered the first African American poetry collection in the nation. See M. Lynn Weiss, "Introduction and Acknowledgements" in *Creole Echoes: The Francophone Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana*, ed. M. Lynn Weiss (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), xxxv; Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 308, n.17. For discussions of major themes and content in *Les Cenelles* see Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, Chapters 2-4; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 114-123.

War. He applied this philosophy to his duties as principal of the Catholic Institute where he continued to work until his death in 1868.

Rodolphe Desdunes, who attended the school when Lanusse was principal, credits the poet with the curriculum design, teaching methods, and overall success of the institution. Proof of his expertly designed education system, according to Desdunes, was found in the facility with which the students applied their academic training "either to commerce or to public service." Along with history, math, and grammar lessons, Lanusse taught his pupils to love their neighbors and to set "benevolence above prejudice, wealth and pride." Desdunes writes, "This conscientious and caring master lost no opportunity that could be turned to the benefit of his students."[72] Lanusse oversaw a talented teaching staff, which included fellow writer and *Les Cenelles* contributor Joanni Questy and other members of his intellectual circle like Constant Reynès, Joseph Lavigne, Samuel Snaer, and Adolphe Duhart. These instructors imparted to their students both a shared Romantic aesthetic and their French and Haitian Revolution-inspired political ideals—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*.[73] Throughout his tenure, Lanusse recognized the significance of Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent to the school's conception and establishment. He honored her each year by bringing the orphans to church where they had a Mass said for the repose of Sirnir's soul.[74] These ceremonies also served as fundraising opportunities. In May 1864, for example, parents of *L'Institution Catholique* students and the general public were invited to St. Augustine's Catholic Church in the Faubourg Tremé for "a funeral service to celebrate the memory of the Widow BERNARD COUVENT, benefactress of this

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[72] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 18-19, 23, 30. In 1855, Desdunes entered the Catholic Institution at age six. See Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 239, n. 33.

[73] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 98-99, 103-105, 217. Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 30; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious," 124.

[74] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 23.

institution." The advertisement for the service explained that donations for the school would be collected.[75]

The Catholic Institution flourished against a backdrop of racial repression. Legal restrictions enacted throughout the 1850s, accompanied by a smear campaign against free people of color in the press made the social position of free people of color decidedly more precarious in New Orleans, in Louisiana, and throughout the United States. Indeed, the year Lanusse became headmaster marked a watershed for the Francophone free black community. In 1852, the city's three separate municipalities, created in 1836, reunited with Anglo-Americans in power. This triumph for the "American sector" brought an increase in the enforcement of repressive laws that had often gone overlooked under white Creole leadership.[76] As the decade wore on, city and state lawmakers adopted further restrictions. Laws, for example, barred free people of color from owning certain types of businesses, incorporating new literary, religious, or charitable societies, and holding public assemblies.[77] Intent on controlling the size of the free black population, the Louisiana legislature progressively tightened manumission requirements until emancipation was completely outlawed in 1857. Two years later, legislators passed a statute that permitted free black individuals to choose a white master and enslave themselves for life. In addition to these legal constraints, anti-black sentiment expressed

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[75] *L'Union*, May 19, 1864.

[76] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 207-208.

[77] Reinders, "Decline of New Orleans Free Negro," 89-90; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 126; "Good and Delicious Country," 126. Reinders cites the 1855 amendment to the law governing the incorporation of societies as explanation for the drastic reduction in the number of free children of color in school in New Orleans between 1850 and 1860. The 1850 Census counted 1,008 free black children in school. Ten years later only 275 free children of color attended school. If these figures are correct, the Catholic Institution's enrollment would count for about one-quarter of free black students in 1850 and practically all of these children in 1860. See Reinders, 89, fn4.

in newspapers throughout Louisiana enflamed rising racial tensions that often resulted in violence against free black communities, particularly in the southwestern parishes.[78]

Hostility and violence towards free people of color in Louisiana occurred within a national context of the deepening sectional crisis over the expansion of slavery in the West. Many Southern whites viewed free people of color as a threat to slavery—whether as allies of the region's large enslaved population or that the mere existence of free blacks caused enslaved people to question their own bondage.[79] Lawmakers throughout the South enacted measures to reduce the free black population and erode distinctions between slave and free status for people of African descent. Federal legal actions during the 1850s bolstered these measures even as they accelerated the conflict over slavery. The Compromise of 1850, for example, included the Fugitive Slave Act that authorized the return of runaway slaves from free states. The law obligated residents in these states to assist in the capture of fugitive slaves, who were arrested and tried by a commissioner. The accused runaway had to prove his or her freedom, but this individual had no right of defense. Thus, any black person could be claimed as a slave, including people born free in the North, with little recourse to challenge the allegation. Seven years later, the United States Supreme Court ruled against a slave named Dred Scott who sued for his freedom after living for several years in a territory designated as free. This decision not only upheld slavery in free states and territories but declared that the federal government had no authority to prohibit slavery in the territories. Moreover, the ruling determined that Scott, by virtue of his race, had no right to sue. Whereas the Fugitive Slave Act blurred

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[78] Reinders, "Decline of New Orleans Free Negro," 91-94, 97; Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 196, 198, 297-300, 308-311; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 82, 84-88; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 126-127.

[79] Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 304; Reinders, "Decline of New Orleans Free Negro," 89; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 86.

the lines between free and slave, the Dred Scott decision flatly denied citizenship to people of African descent, depriving them of all rights and protections provided for by the Constitution.[80]

Emigration formed one response by free people of color to the heightened racial repression of the 1850s. Free black advocates of relocation suggested various destinations in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, but in the end, only a small minority of free people of color left the United States. Emigration did gain some traction among Francophone free people of color in Louisiana in the decade before the Civil War. France had long served as an outlet for free people of color in New Orleans, whether as a temporary residence to gain an education or as a permanent home. Language and cultural affinities, better opportunities, and less pronounced prejudice drew émigrés there. Several prominent free black families and individuals relocated to France in the 1840s and 1850s, including wealthy business owners, artisans, writers, and musicians.[81] In addition to France, two other places proved especially attractive to free black émigrés. In the final years of the 1850s, free people of color in Louisiana looked first towards Mexico and then to Haiti as places of economic opportunity and respite from racial discrimination. Neither destination inspired mass departures; however, and often, the migrants returned to New Orleans within a few years. Yet, even for those who stayed, the idea of emigration provided a powerful means of imagining life without the restrictions placed on free people of color in a slave society.[82]

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[80] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 20-22.

[81] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 12, 22-23, 25; Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 150-151; Rebecca Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 48, No. 2, (April 2007): 241-242; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 38, 44, 47-48, 97, 117, 137; Fabre, "New Orleans Creole Expatriates in France," 179-182.

[82] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 12-13, 26.

Migration schemes to both Mexico and Haiti had a direct bearing on the Catholic Institution. People connected to the school, including administrators, supporters, and students could be found among the émigrés. In 1857, Louis Nelson Fouché, whose father was an original director of the school, forged a formal arrangement with the president of Mexico to settle a colony near Tampico in Veracruz. In exchange for "the same rights and equality enjoyed by the other inhabitants" of Mexico, Fouché agreed to bring one hundred free black families to settle there.[83] Prior to signing the agreement, Fouché and his wife had relocated to Tampico, where they welcomed a daughter on October 10, 1856.[84] The Fouchés and other free black New Orleanians in Veracruz were joined by a group of free people of color from the rural Attakapas region in southwest Louisiana. In 1858, however, war broke out in Mexico, and soon after the Mexican government reported that the inhabitants had abandoned these settlements. The Fouché family returned to New Orleans, where Louis Nelson Fouché taught mathematics and served on the Board of Directors for the Catholic Institute.[85]

As instability erupted in Mexico, migration to Haiti began in earnest. Agents working for Haiti's ruler, Faustin Soulouque, encouraged free people of color to leave Louisiana in 1858. Those who did were to receive free transportation and citizenship in Soulouque's "empire." The offer to relocate to the island had particular appeal to New Orleanians with familial and social ties to Haitians. As the first black republic created through the revolutionary overthrow of slavery, Haiti held deep symbolic meaning, as

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[83] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 29, quoted on 30; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 85-86; *Incorporation de la Societé catholique*, April 20, 1847.

[84] Maria Theresa Fouché Thompson, December 24, 1856, Parroquia Del Sagrario, Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico, in Ancestry.com, *Mexico, Select Baptisms, 1560-1950* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014).

[85] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 86; Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 296; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 34-35; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 101, 145.

well. Increased legal restrictions added further incentive for free people of color to migrate. Political unrest broke out in Haiti, however, when Fabre Geffrard overthrew Soulouque in December 1858. President Geffrard returned the nation to a republic and resumed his predecessor's promotion of free black emigration through agents in Boston and New Orleans.[86] Free people of color continued to embark for Haiti on the eve of the Civil War, including individuals associated with *L'Institution Catholique*. It was likely former scholars and their families living on the island that sent a donation to the school in late 1859 under the name "the friends of Geffrard." As late as 1861, students at the school bid farewell to a classmate who set sail on the *Laura* bound for Port-au-Prince.[87]

Witnessing the departure of friends, relatives, and other people in the community made a significant impression on the children at the Catholic Institution. An extant set of copybooks from this period containing male students' written assignments reveals the practical and pedagogical role migration played in their intellectual and political development. In her analysis of the copybooks, Mary Niall Mitchell argues that the compositions, written in epistolary form and addressed to various destinations throughout the Atlantic World, allowed the students to envision places of freedom, equality, and prosperity for themselves and their families. In letters addressed to towns first in Mexico and later in Haiti, students discussed the possibilities of resettling in these countries. Comparing these missives, however, Mitchell identifies a shift in the students' focus. Those written to classmates in Mexico concerned setting up businesses and farms, buying land, and sending the necessary supplies. In the letters addressed to Haiti, students turned their attention from the commercial aspects of emigration to an awareness of the

[86] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 86; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 35-38.
[87] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 40-41, 44, 246, n.120.

racialized motivations for free people of color to migrate.[88] Relocating to "the country of our color," as one student referred to Haiti, took on added significance in the final years of the 1850s.[89] Mitchell writes, "While these assignments trained the children in the art of letter writing and in the proper maintenance of business relations, they also required the students to think about racial identity, nationality, and citizenship within the broad bounds of the African Diaspora, rather than the narrow confines of the deep South." Although most students never left New Orleans, they formed invaluable and empowering connections to the Atlantic World that would inform their understanding of the political upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction in profound ways.[90]

Indeed, the Catholic Institution's very existence challenged the racist presumptions of black inferiority that were used to justify slavery, severely restrict the rights of free blacks, and deny citizenship to all people of African descent. The school's success served as a point of pride in the free people of color community. For the many that stayed in New Orleans, the school offered a protected space where free people of color advanced their intellectual, cultural, and political development and honed their leadership skills. This learning environment fostered their aspirations to live in a world free of racial inequalities. In the late 1850s, such a vision appeared unattainable in New Orleans, but when Union troops arrived in the city in 1862, an impossible dream became a real possibility. Free men of color connected to the school formed the vanguard in the fight for political and civil rights for people of African descent both during and after the

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[88] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 11-14, 16, 19, 26, 30-36, 40-41 and Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 124, 126, 128, 130-131, 134-137, 140, 143-144. The copybooks are located in the Archdiocese Archives of New Orleans. Unfortunately, assignments for female students are not extant.

[89] Quoted in Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 44 and Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 144. For original see J. Bordenave to A. Frilot, Esq., "Metz, France," May 22, 1861, Catholic Institution English Composition Copybook II, AANO.

[90] Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," quote on 126; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 42, 47.

war. The groundwork for their activism was laid at the Catholic Institution—"the nursery for revolution in Louisiana."[91]

A Radical Vision of the Future: The Civil War and Reconstruction

L'Institution Catholique continued operations during the Civil War. In 1862, the school had about 250 students, and this enrollment was sustained throughout the conflict.[92] These numbers notwithstanding, wartime conditions took a toll on the institution. The Union naval blockade that led to the capture of New Orleans in April 1862 plunged the city into poverty. Under these circumstances, raising the necessary funds for the school was at times difficult. The Catholic Institution continued to hold charity events to collect donations and likely to provide a diversion from the strains of war.[93] The Board of Directors also requested and received money from the military-controlled Bureau of Education, created by General Benjamin Butler to oversee New Orleans' public school system. In their petition, the directors explained that "they have no other means to sustain [the school], than the voluntary contributions of charitable persons, which, in these hard times, amounts almost to nothing." They further noted that "the colored population contributes also to the Public School fund of this Department,

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[91] Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 54-55; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 124-125; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 13, 17-19, 26, 48-50; Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, quote on 42. Although less is known about the female teachers and students, Desdunes highlights the achievements of a few individuals. The role of women in the operations of the Catholic Institution is a topic that deserves more research. For Afro-Creole women's participation in postbellum civic and charitable work see Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 192.

[92] Meyer, *Names Over New Orleans Public Schools*, 47; Willey, "Education of the Colored Population," 248.

[93] Several letters in the students' copybook discuss a charity ball held for the Catholic Institution in January 1862. See for example, H. Relf to L. Lamaniére, "St. Louis Bay, LA," January 15, 1862 and E. Perrault to H. Vasserot, Esq., "Bayonne, France," January 15, 1862, Catholic Institution English Composition Copybook II, AANO; hereafter, Copybook II. In his letter, Etienne Perrault describes the ball to his friend Henry Vasserot. He writes, "I believe that they made a fine, a little sum because there were many persons there."

wherefrom they derive no benefit whatsoever."[94] When a new school board came into power in 1865 it withdrew this support. That year the *Société* was forced to sell a piece of land in order to pay three months' salary owed to the teachers. Upkeep of the building also suffered during this period. Taking stock of the institution at the end of the decade, the directors reported holes in the ceiling and windows with no glass. The school survived despite these hardships and even saw enrollment increase to 280 pupils by 1867.[95]

The students continued their writing assignments during the conflict, as well. In their discussion of various aspects of the war, the boys described its effects on their daily lives. In the early days of the war, the students wrote about their fascination with the newly-formed Confederate troops that drilled in New Orleans. They were particularly taken with the companies of Zouaves with their distinctive "wide red breeches" and "gaiters made out of India rubber."[96] Yet, even in their enthusiasm for the Zouave soldiers, the boys recognized the risks of war. One student concluded his description of the troops with a warning to his friend: "I advise you to start for no matter what country for they will make you a soldier and that's what I am going to do for I don't want myself to be killed." He candidly added, "I am very brave when there is no danger."[97]

While the federal blockade made leaving the city difficult, the letters allowed the students an escape through their imagination. Several compositions recount invented itineraries that entailed stops along the Eastern seaboard, Europe, the Caribbean, and

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[94] Quoted in Meyer, *Names Over New Orleans Public Schools*, 47; Willey, "Education of the Colored Population," 248.

[95] Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 60; *V.te de propriété par la Société Catholique pour l'instruct.n des Orphelins indigens à Jean Valadie*, December 9, 1865, O. de Armas, Volume 81, Act 101, NARC; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 229; Mitchell, "Good and Delicious Country," 125, fn5.

[96] Armand Cloud to L. Brion, "Gainesville, LA," April 10, 1861, Copybook II, AANO.

[97] H. Relf to E. Fluery, "Dayton, OH," April 10, 1861, Copybook II, AANO.

Africa. A few of these trips involved thrilling evasions of the Union navy boats (much like the real-life Confederate blockade runners).[98] Another journey included visits to Fort Sumter, the Confederate Capital of Richmond, and Manassas, where the battle was in progress. The student admitted that because "I didn't want to fight, I came right back home."[99] These flights of fancy, Mitchell argues, underscore the broader Atlantic context in which the students comprehended the war. Haiti, in particular, played an important role in the students' interpretation of local events. Letters addressed to Haiti, a symbol of black nationhood, about the conflict over slavery at home enabled the students to undertake "a transatlantic exploration of freedom, citizenship, and race at a time when all three were the subject of violent debate in the United States."[100]

As the city began to feel the economic effects of the blockade, the students addressed the privations of war. In June 1861, a student explained that his "family is declining in poverty" because "money is very rare."[101] Describing the prohibitive cost of items like flour and soap, another student reported that "everybody is in a great misery and every thing is out of price."[102] General Butler's taxation policies enacted during the Union occupation alleviated the situation somewhat. In September 1862, a pupil named Ernest Brunet wrote to a friend, "I tell you if the Yankees would not come here we would be starving to death." Yet, life in occupied New Orleans still had its challenges. Brunet lamented his unsuccessful search for employment. Faced with limited job opportunities, he decided to continue his studies at the Catholic Institution.[103]

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[98] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 45-46.
[99] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 45; H. Relf to A. Cloud, "Paris, France," October 2, 1861, Copybook II, AANO.
[100] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 42, 44-45, 47.
[101] J. Toussaint to A. Bernard, June 26, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO.
[102] H. Relf to J. Bordenave, "Madrid, Spain," November 6, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO.
[103] Quoted in Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 48.

Beyond the excitement of drilling soldiers and the hardships of wartime inflation, the students' letters point to their own evolving understanding of the war's implications for free people of color. The boys' initial responses to the Civil War were marked by ambiguous loyalties. A student named John Blandin described a battle in which "six hundred Lincolnites were slain, and only fifty of our brave Southerners were killed." Confident that the South will "lick" the North, Blandin signed the letter "from the heart of a Creole, and who is proud to be [a] Southern man."[104] Blandin's classmate, Armand Cloud, seemed much less convinced of a Southern victory and wrote with trepidation about the consequences of the conflict: "Mr. Lincoln menaces us to burn up the city of New Orleans, if the South don't give up; but they say they will not; and (they) rather see all the Southern parts burnt than to give up... but they cannot whip the North, it is just the same as a son trying to whip his father; for the North has war vessels and the south has none."[105] Whereas Blandin wrote inclusively of "our brave Southerners" and identified himself as such, Cloud distanced himself from either side. Using the pronoun "they" to describe the South, he criticized the Confederates' willingness to see the region destroyed before backing down. Yet, his belief that the North had the advantage did not necessarily translate to support for the Union. Concluding his letter, Cloud wrote, "I am very much sorry that Mr. Lincoln got elected not as President, but as King on the left."[106]

To interpret these letters it is important to note when the young men composed them. Both assignments date from the first few weeks of the war. Cloud's letter doubting

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[104] John Blandin to H. Vasserot, "Port-au-Prince Hayti," May 29, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO. This letter is peculiar in that someone crossed out "Southern Confederacy" and replaced it with "United States" so that it reads with the opposite sense of allegiance. For an analysis of this letter see Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 42-44.

[105] Armand Cloud to H. Poichare, "Cincinnati, OH," April 17, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO.

[106] Armand Cloud to H. Poichare, April 17, 1861.

a Confederate victory was written on April 17, 1861, five days after the firing on Fort Sumter. In the wake of the initial outbreak of war, he reacted with concern over the threat that the war posed to his home and ambivalence about which side to support. Blandin wrote his letter praising the bravery of Southern soldiers on May 29, 1861. His response to the war was that of both excitement and endorsement for the "Southern Confederacy army." Although each student had his own personal opinion of the war, an event that occurred at the school between these two dates may explain Blandin's enthusiasm.

On April 22, a crowd of free people of color gathered at the Catholic Institution for a military recruitment rally. Several of the students' letters described the "large assembly" that took place "in our school yard in order to raise a company of soldiers."[107] Principal Armand Lanusse gave a stirring speech that highlighted the long, proud tradition of the free black militia in Louisiana. He compared fighting to defend New Orleans from the Union to an earlier generation's service for Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. The speech made an impression on John Blandin who recounted it in detail. He reported that "fifteen hundred of our brave creoles" pledged to fight, including veterans of 1815 and some of his classmates. Blandin explained that "they are ready to spill their blood for their rights or die for it."[108] He did not, however, sign the list. Even in the fervor created by Lanusse's speech, free men of color had mixed feelings about fighting for the Confederacy. Several letters refer to individuals who signed up and immediately regretted it. According to one, a student named Emile Farrar cried on the way home "because he was very sorry" for adding his name to the list.[109]

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[107] J. Blandin to Henry Vasserot, "Louisville, KY," April 24, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO.
[108] J. Blandin to Henry Vasserot, April 24, 1861; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 43.
[109] T. Richard to A. Cloud, "Baton Rouge," April 24, 1861, Copybook II, ANNO.

The assembly at the Catholic Institution led to the formation of the First Native Guards, Louisiana Militia, Confederate States of America, which the governor granted official sanction in May 1861. Thirteen companies made up the regiment with over 1,000 men between them. A white commander oversaw the regiment, but free men of color elected the officers of each company from their own ranks. Several of the companies formed out of existing benevolent societies such as the Society of True Friends and the Economy Society. Armand Lanusse served as Captain of his own company. In addition to Lanusse, a number of men connected to *L'Institution Catholique* joined the Native Guard, including teachers, students, and supporters. [110] The companies held benediction ceremonies in which they received a flag from women in the community ("godmothers") and had it blessed by a priest. Money collected at these events went to support the school.[111] The students continued to follow the developments of the Guards. In May, a student wrote with excitement: "The colored militia is raising with an astonishing rapidity they make exercise in each company in particular nearby every night."[112]

The free men of color who joined the Native Guards had complicated reasons for doing so. Many of these men owned property, and for a number of them that included slaves. Thus, the desire to protect their investments and preserve their social status likely served as one motive. However, evidence that pro-Confederate white residents pressured these men to support their cause also exists. Testimonies made after New Orleans fell to

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[110] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 229; James Hollandsworth, Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 2; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 68, 70-71. Students who joined the Native Guards included Lucien Lamaniére, Joseph Dinet and Emile Farrar. Other recruits with connections to the school included Arnold Bertonneau, N. J. Bacchus, Henry Louis Rey, Ludger Boguille, J. Manuel Camps, Louis Nelson Fouché, Armand Duhart, Pierre Adolphe Duhart, and Louis Lainez. See *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System*, National Park Service, accessed at http://www.nps.gov /civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm.

[111] Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 72.

[112] T. Toussaint to E. Pierrenas, "Plymouth, NH," May 1, 1861, Copybook II, AANO.

the Union indicated that the men received threats against their lives and that of their families if they did not muster a company to defend the city. While faced with intimidation, many free men of color felt strongly about protecting the place where they were born and called home.[113] The students' letters articulated this concern. Before the recruitment meeting, Armand Cloud worried about Lincoln burning the city. In his letter describing the rally composed a few days later, Cloud explained, "We have just now formed the colored militia and every man signed his name. All the [S]ociety of True Friends have composed a battalion *to save the city of New Orleans.*"[114] The men further tied this line of reasoning to their own ethnic identity.[115] John Blandin's self-description as both a "Creole" and "a proud Southern man" illustrates this sentiment. Much like the members of the free black militia who offered their services to Governor Claiborne in 1804, the outbreak of war presented another generation of free men of color to defend their native land.

The First Native Guards regiment never engaged in battle for the Confederacy. White leaders restricted their assignments to drills and parades and declined the Guards' offer to escort Union prisoners through New Orleans. In February 1862, the Native Guard ceased as an official regiment, following the state legislature's new regulations that limited enlistment to white men. Only when Captain David Farragut and the Union Navy started to sail up the Mississippi River did the governor restore the Guard's legitimacy. Upon the surrender of New Orleans on April 29, 1862, the Confederates retreated out of the city. The Native Guards did not follow suit. Instead, they complied with the regiment

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[113] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 43; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 231-233; Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 3-6; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 69-70.

[114] A. Cloud to E. Meunier, "France, Paris," April 24, 1861, Copybook II, AANO. Emphasis added.

[115] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 43; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 232.

commander's order to disband and stashed their weapons in three different sites—Economy Hall, Claiborne Hall, and the Catholic Institution.[116]

The federal occupation of New Orleans brought new opportunities for free men of color. Shortly after the arrival of Union troops, four delegates chosen from among the officers of the former Native Guards met with General Benjamin Butler to extend their loyalty and services to the United States army. Butler did not accept the offer of manpower, but the overture reassured him that the city's free people of color were not secessionists, as the pro-Southern newspapers had led him to believe. By August 1862, Butler reconsidered the delegation's proposal. In need of troops and with further assurance of the former Native Guards' loyalty to the Union, Butler ordered the enlistment of free black men in three newly-created regiments. On September 27, 1862, only a few days after President Lincoln announced his intention to emancipate slaves in rebel states, Butler established the 1st Louisiana Native Guard Infantry. Totaling about 1,000 soldiers, the new Native Guard consisted of ten companies and was overseen by white commanders. Each company had its own free black officers.[117] Some members of the Confederate Native Guards, such as Captains Henry Louis Rey and Andre Cailloux, joined the Union Native Guards, but the majority did not.[118] Much like the decision to join the Confederate regiment, free men of color joined the Union army for various reasons. Food rations for soldiers' families and income served as practical incentives, but

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[116] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 6-10, 17; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 72, 74; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 159.

[117] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 16-18, 24-25; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 229, 231, 233; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 74-77.

[118] Ochs estimates that 33% of men in the Confederate Native Guards joined the Union Native Guards. Not all of the Union soldiers were free men of color. Enslaved men who freed themselves joined the regiments, especially the 2nd and 3rd Native Guard regiments mustered later in the fall of 1862. In addition, some Creole of color activists, such as Louis Nelson Fouché, joined the 6th Regiment, Louisiana Infantry for a sixty day term in the summer of 1863. See Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 79 and Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 21. For more on André Cailloux see Ochs, *A Black Patriot*.

the political implications of fighting for the United States were not lost on the new Native Guards.[119]

The Francophone free black community, as a whole, understood the possibility of gaining significant political and civil rights through their support of the Union cause. The same day that the 1st Louisiana Native Guard became the first Union regiment to include soldiers of African descent, a group of free men of color published the inaugural issue of a bi-weekly newspaper, *L'Union*. A number of these men were among those who did not re-enlist with the federal Native Guards, choosing to turn their attention to political activism on the home front rather than the war front.[120] Fervent supporters of the 1st Louisiana Native Guards, the writers made explicit connections between free black military service and political equality. The newspaper had significant associations to the Catholic Institution. Paul Trevigne, a teacher at the school, served as chief editor. Other faculty and administrators published articles in the paper and provided financial support. Louis Nelson Fouché, for example, managed the paper's subscriptions, wrote political essays for its columns, and worked as an army recruiter. *L'Union* provided an outlet for Afro-Creole community leaders to espouse their radical visions of a new nation where freedom and equality for all men replaced slavery and racial prejudice.[121]

The students' letters written in the fall of 1862 registered this shift in allegiance and acknowledged the opportunity for revolutionary change that it signified for free people of color in New Orleans. The boys enthusiastically discussed the enlistment of

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[119] Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 75-76.

[120] These activities were not mutually exclusive. Henry Louis Rey, for example, served as a captain for a company in the 1st Native Guards, published articles in *L'Union*, and supported the Catholic Institution. His father, Barthélemy Rey, was one of the original directors of the *Société Catholique*. See Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 124-124, 231, 233, 235-236.

[121] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 223-224, 226-228, 234-235, 237; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 221-223; Ochs, *A Black Patriot*, 89.

free black soldiers in the Union Native Guard companies. One student explained "that the 1st colored Louisiana regiment (volunteers) commanded by Col. Stafford started last Saturday. They went with such bravery that there were some amongst them that were singing, some that were saying that they would bring the four limbs of old Jeff Davis and some of the other ones the head of Beauregard." Now fully on the side of the North, the students viewed Confederate government and military leaders as the enemy.[122]

The young men also recognized the potential political consequences of Union occupation. On November 26, 1862 Lucien Lamanière wrote:

> I am very glad since the Federals are here, they are telling that Gen. Butler is going to make the colored men of this city who were born free vote, if he do the colored men will be very glad to see equality reign here and if he is ever to be elected President of the United States I am sure that he will be President because the colored men will vote for him, and I must tell you another thing. The [white] creoles in this city will die when they see the negroes vote as well as them, those negroes whom they were always whipping in the plantations take their tickets and put it in the box.[123]

Lamanière described a political landscape that had been inconceivable only a few years before when he and his classmates wrote about emigrating to Mexico and Haiti in search of better opportunities and relief from racial repression. With the city under federal military rule, free black men fighting on the side of the Union, and Creole of color intellectuals and activists calling for emancipation and black male suffrage in *L'Union*, young men like Lamanière could envision a New Orleans where equality reigned and access to political power extended to both freed slaves and free colored men.[124] Yet, Lamanière's prediction that white people will die when they see former slaves vote

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[122] Unknown author to R. Duallim, "Dubuque, Iowa," October 29, 1862, Copybook II, AANO; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 47-48.

[123] L. Lamanière to E. Brunet, "Dubuque, Iowa," November 26, 1862, Copybook II, AANO.

[124] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 49-50.

suggests that the students shared an understanding of the scale of difficulty faced by black people in the struggle for political and civil rights in the aftermath of the war.

For people of African descent in New Orleans, the struggle began long before the Civil War ended. A month after Lamanière recorded his optimistic outlook on Union occupation, General Nathaniel Banks replaced General Butler as commander of the Department of the Gulf. In his attempt to appease conservative white Unionists, Banks undid a number of Butler's policies, especially those considered racially progressive. He decreased recruitment efforts for black soldiers until the need for manpower forced him to reverse course. He also resolved to remove black officers from their commands, which he did "[b]y insult, humiliation, and dogged persistence." By the end of his term in 1864, Banks had successfully eliminated almost all of the officers of African descent commissioned by Butler.[125]

These setbacks for black soldiers only served to further galvanize free black activists in their efforts to press for full political rights. Indeed, officers forced out of their positions by Banks, like Arnold Bertonneau and P.B.S. Pinchback, became outspoken proponents of black citizenship and equality. In December 1863, Lincoln charged Banks with managing Louisiana's transition from a military government to a civil one, as part of the president's reconstruction plan. With elections for the new government officials and delegates for the state constitution convention scheduled for early 1864, French- and English-speaking free black leaders joined forces to push for inclusion of all free people of color in the vote.[126] They stressed the connection between military service and political

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[125] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," quote on 223; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 238-239.

[126] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 223-224; Gerald Capers, *Occupied City: New Orleans under the Federals, 1862-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press,

equality. *L'Union* contributor Paul Boisdoré argued at an interracial Union rally that "[i]f the United States has the right to arm us, it certainly has the right to allow us the rights of suffrage."[127] Banks, however, refused to include anyone of African descent in the political process, and Lincoln's reconstruction plan only allowed individuals who participated in the 1860 election to vote in the 1864 elections.[128]

Free black leaders did not give up the fight. In January 1864, suffrage proponents composed a petition that garnered signatures from 1,000 free black property owners, twenty-seven free black veterans from the Battle of New Orleans, and twenty-two white radicals. They also raised money to send two men to present their argument to the president. In February, Jean Baptiste Roudanez and Arnold Bertonneau, who had served on the Board of Directors for the Catholic Institution, headed to Washington. They first met with congressmen Charles Sumner and William Kelley, two Radical Republicans who supported equal voting rights. Then Bertonneau and Roudanez presented their petition to Lincoln. While the president understood their concerns, he claimed that he could not commit to their cause.[129] Following the meeting, Lincoln asked the newly-elected Louisiana Governor through private correspondence if perhaps some free men of color should be included in the state electorate, including "the very intelligent" and "those who have fought gallantly in our ranks."[130] Lincoln's modest suggestion went

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1965), 133-134. At the time, slavery still existed in New Orleans because Lincoln exempted federally occupied territories from the Emancipation Proclamation. Free black activists sought voting rights for men free before the outbreak of the war for the immediate election. When Lincoln's reconstruction plan denied this possibility these activists began calling for inclusive suffrage to all black men in conjunction with complete emancipation.

[127] Quoted in Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 248.

[128] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 250; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 223-224.

[129] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 250-252; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 224-226; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 225.

[130] Quoted in Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 252.

unheeded. The constitution drawn up in the summer of 1864 abolished slavery but did not provide black people the right to vote. Congress, however, had to accept the constitution for it to go into effect. Dissatisfied with Lincoln's reconstruction plan, Sumner and his radical colleagues prevented the constitution's approval.[131]

The bold actions of Bertonneau and Roudanez and the men they represented in New Orleans brought the issue of political equality for all people of African descent to national attention. Upon leaving Washington, the delegates traveled north to meet with white and black abolitionists. At a dinner in Boston given in their honor, the Louisiana emissaries gave a rousing speech to an audience that included abolitionist leaders Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. Bertonneau explained that they not only sought emancipation and suffrage but also "that the colored citizens shall have and enjoy every civil, political and religious right that white citizens enjoy; in a word, that every man shall stand equal before the law." He recognized, however, that equal rights did not automatically end racism. In order to make "caste, founded on prejudice against color, disappear," Bertonneau called for integrated schools so that children of both races could learn to respect each other. This, Bertonneau believed, would transform "the character of the whole people."[132]

What Bertonneau proposed in Boston was nothing less than a dramatic reordering of the social and political structure of the United States. Paul Trevigne and his contributors to *L'Union*, echoed this radical vision of a post-slavery future in the

[131] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 252; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 226; Capers, *Occupied City*, 141-142.
[132] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 227-228.

newspaper, which he revamped in July 1864 as the New Orleans *Tribune*.[133] The activists faced an uphill battle. Even William Lloyd Garrison argued that suffrage should not become a goal until slavery was fully abolished. In an editorial supporting Lincoln's reconstruction policy, Garrison voiced concern that newly freed African Americans did not have the wherewithal to participate in the political system because slavery had kept them ignorant and propertyless. Besides, he asked rhetorically, "when was it ever known that liberation from bondage was accompanied by a recognition of political equality?"[134] To this query, Trevigne fired back with the example of France. In the pages of the *Tribune*, he explained that France had abolished slavery twice—first in 1794 and then definitively in 1848. In both cases, emancipated slaves received full citizenship and political rights. As a teacher at the Catholic Institution, Trevigne inculcated his students with an awareness of the broader Atlantic World. He now extended those lessons to white men like Garrison "who play the part of the defenders of the Declaration of Independence" but "dare not throw off their irrational and absurd prejudices."[135]

In 1865, Trévigne and his cohort encountered further obstacles in their fight for equality. The war's end brought Confederate soldiers back home, and Lincoln's assassination placed Andrew Johnson in power. Conservative whites took control of the provisional Louisiana government from the moderate faction. Although Afro-Creole and African American activists joined with radical whites and some moderates to challenge the conservative ascendancy, these groups suffered from their own disagreements about the best course of action. Meanwhile, the conservative government, which now included

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[133] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 252; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 228-229.

[134] Quoted in Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 253.

[135] Quoted in Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 254.

former Confederates, enacted Black Codes to control freedmen and women. President Johnson's lenient reconstruction plan approved these measures. Desperate to regain the government from the Confederate-dominated Democratic party, white Unionists and Republicans devised a plan to reconvene the 1864 state constitutional convention. They sought to revise the constitution to grant suffrage to black people and deny it to former Confederates. It was a risky measure and ultimately led to violent riot.[136]

On July 30, 1866 the delegates gathered at the Mechanics' Institute in New Orleans to reconvene the constitutional convention. Although black activists and their radical white allies did not agree with the plan, they attended the meeting to show support for black suffrage. A large procession of black Union veterans, joined by black laborers and other "friends of the convention" marched outside of the hall. Soon after the meeting began, shots rang out. A white mob that included police officers descended on the conveners. The mob attacked black supporters outside of the Mechanics' Institute and then pushed its way inside.[137]

Known as the Massacre of 1866, the riot lasted several hours. In the end, over 150 black men sustained injuries and forty-four men died. Several Creole of color activists were among the casualties. Arnold Bertonneau escaped from the mob with the help of a police officer who thought he was a white. Other men were less fortunate. Joseph Manuel Camps and Ludger Boguille, both Catholic Institution teachers, were inside the hall when the mob broke in. While the men survived the attack, they were beaten and Camps was also stabbed. Victor Lacroix, whose father, François Lacroix, served as the founding

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[136] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 255-261.

[137] Robert Fogelson and Richard Rubenstein, eds., *Mass Violence in America: New Orleans Riots of July 30, 1866* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), quote on 5, 7-10, 16-17; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 261; Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 106.

president of the *Société Catholique*, did not survive the riot. He attempted to surrender when the mob arrived at the hall, but white rioters killed him, took his money, and mutilated his body.[138] The death of Victor Lacroix "dealt a wrenching blow to the close-knit black Creole community." Rather than causing activists to back down, however, Lacroix's murder spurred them on.[139]

The riot in New Orleans helped precipitate the implementation of Radical Reconstruction in the South. In 1867, military rule returned to Louisiana and delegates were elected to create a new state constitution. Men of African descent made up half of the delegation, including former Union army officers and activists like Arnold Bertonneau and P.B.S. Pinchback. Other members of the convention included the brothers, Thomas and Robert Isabelle, Caesar C. Antoine, and Ovide Blandin, the brother of Catholic Institution student John Blandin. With support from their white Republican allies, these men created a state constitution that reflected the Afro-Creole community's revolutionary social and political vision. Per the Reconstruction Acts, the state had to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment which gave black men the right to vote. In addition to suffrage and citizenship, the 1868 constitution included measures that outlawed segregation in government buildings, private businesses licensed by the state, public transportation, and public schools.[140]

Education formed a key piece in the fight for political and racial equality after the Civil War. People who were free before the war may have had better access to education,

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[138] Fogelson and Rubenstein, *New Orleans Riots*, 12, 15, 332, 384; Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 107; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 261-262.

[139] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, quote on 263, 264.

[140] Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana during Reconstruction*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 49-50, 54-55, 59-60, 62, 92-97. Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 108; Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 272; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "Americanization of Black New Orleans," 241.

but they were not alone in recognizing its value. Before emancipation, enslaved men and women made clear associations between the acquisition of literacy and freedom, often taking great risks and devising creative methods to learn to read and write. As the Union army advanced through the South, large numbers of enslaved individuals resolved to free themselves by fleeing to Union lines. Former slaves in contraband camps and Union-occupied towns immediately sought to establish schools for themselves and their children. African American men who gained their freedom by joining the Union Army were also "anxious to learn."[141] Regiments formed under General Banks' orders in lower Louisiana included an instructor to teach black soldiers. At the insistence of freedpeople, and often through their own determination, schools for formerly enslaved adults and children emerged in New Orleans during the war. Banks eventually organized these schools into what became the basis of a public school system for African Americans in the city.[142] In the struggle to define their freedom, then, former slaves made education central to their lives as free people. Both freedpeople and formerly free people of color understood access to education as critical to ensure the continued protection of their free status and the rights of all people of African descent.[143]

Black politicians and activists in Louisiana not only sought access to education for their children, but they specifically insisted on an integrated public school system. They believed that integrated schools offered a way for the nation to move beyond racial prejudice. Echoing Arnold Bertonneau's address to Northern abolitionists in 1864, Robert Isabelle told his fellow state Representatives in 1870 that "I want to see the children of the state educated together... I want to see them play together, to study together, to eat

[141] Williams, *Self-Taught*, 7-8, 12, 30-33, 35-36, 45,47, quote on 49.
[142] Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 55-57.
[143] Williams, *Self-Taught*, 69, 78; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 191.

their lunch together; and when they grow up to be men they will love each other..."[144] Isabelle envisioned a future of racial cooperation built on a foundation of black and white children learning together. Proponents of integrated public schools like Bertonneau and Isabelle also recognized the detriment segregation would have on future race relations. In the *Tribune*, Paul Trévigne asked the critics of integration, "When will the right time come? It is, perchance, after we have separated for ten or twenty years the two races in different schools, and when we shall have realized the separation of this nation into two peoples?" No, Trévigne warned, "[i]t will, then be TOO LATE."[145]

Between 1871 and 1877 integrated public schools existed in New Orleans. Initial enactment of this policy met with resistance on the part of white politicians and parents, forcing the state legislature to reorganize the school system and remove the pre-1868 school board members by court order. A number of white parents pulled their children out of the public school system in the first year of integration, but over the next several years, many of these students had returned. Private schools founded for white students could not compete with the public schools in either quality or funding. Overall, Joseph Logsdon and Donald Devore estimate that about one third of the public schools were integrated, whereas as about one-third served mostly white students and one-third served primarily black students. Most of the integrated schools were located in the French Quarter and the Creole faubourgs, but at least six schools in the uptown districts enrolled students of both races. In total, around 1,000 students of African descent attended integrated schools during the 1870s. Integration extended beyond the student body to include faculty and school board members. By mid-decade, black teachers made up

[144] Quoted in Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 91.
[145] Quoted in Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 67.

eleven percent of the public school teaching force. In 1873, the governor appointed an African American man named William Brown as State Superintendent of Education. Brown held this position until 1876.[146] In addition, a number of black political leaders served on the New Orleans' school board during the 1870s, including prominent Creole of color activists like Henry Louis Rey, Paul Trévigne, and Victor Eugene McCarthy, as well as, African American politician P.B.S. Pinchback.[147]

Despite the relative success of an integrated public school system in New Orleans, its brief existence ended with the Compromise of 1877, which resolved the contested presidential election of 1876 in favor of Rutherford B. Hayes and effectively terminated Radical Reconstruction in the South. National and local events that occurred prior to the 1876 election presaged the demise of school integration in New Orleans. A severe economic depression that began in 1873 jeopardized the schools' tax-supported funding. The following year, a white vigilante group called the White League terrorized the Republican-led Louisiana government and organized violent attacks on integrated schools in New Orleans. On the national level, Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill in 1875 without a measure on integrated public schools.[148] With the disputed election in

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[146] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 67-68, 70-71, 73, 76, 80; Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 29.

[147] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 216. Born free in Georgia, Pinchback came to New Orleans in 1862. He served as a Union officer in the 2nd Louisiana Native Guards. He was a delegate to the 1868 constitutional convention where he authored the Civil Rights Article that called for integration on public transportation and state-licensed businesses. Pinchback then served as state senator between 1868 and 1871. He replaced fellow African-American politician, Oscar J. Dunn, as lieutenant governor following Dunn's sudden death in 1871. For a very brief time between December 9, 1872 and January 13, 1873, Pinchback was the governor of Louisiana after the white governor, Henry Warmoth, had been impeached. See Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 171.

[148] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 76, 81. Although Radical Republican Charles Sumner attempted to include a provision guaranteeing integrated schools in the Civil Rights Bill for a number of years, he was not successful. The bill passed in 1875 outlawed segregation in public accommodations and transportation, prohibited the exclusion of African Americans from juries, and allowed individuals to sue if they experienced discrimination in these areas. The United States Supreme Court ruled the bill

1876, Republicans in Washington agreed to end military rule in Louisiana for the state's electoral votes to count for Hayes. This move brought white Democrats into power across the state. The Redeemers, as they were known, set out to dismantle laws that threatened white social and political power. Over the next two decades, Democrats gradually eliminated the political and civil rights gained by people of African descent during Reconstruction. Without the federal government's support, integrated schools could not be sustained in New Orleans.[149]

The school board appointed by the new governor in 1877 immediately re-segregated the public schools in New Orleans. Black New Orleanians did not give up on integrated schools without a fight, however. When the school board met to vote on the resolution to segregate the public schools, a group of Afro-Creole and African American community leaders presented a petition to the board denouncing segregated schools. The resolution passed despite their protests. The petitioners then turned to the court system to challenge the legality of the school board's creation of separate schools. *Tribune* editor and Catholic Institution faculty member Paul Trévigne filed a suit that claimed segregated schools as unconstitutional, according to the 1868 Louisiana state constitution. Trévigne's case garnered a temporary injunction against the school board, but the judge ultimately dismissed it. Arnold Bertonneau and another Afro-Creole, August Dellande, filed a second suit after their children were denied admittance to the public school near their homes that had been designated as a white school. Bertonneau argued that the school board violated his and his children's civil rights under the Fourteenth Amendment and the Louisiana state constitution, but the judge disagreed. The Louisiana State

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unconstitutional in 1883. See Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990), 226-227, 234-235.

[149] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 81-82.

Supreme Court heard Dellande's case on appeal but not until after the state constitution was rewritten, minus the clause that required integrated schools. Dellande, too, lost his case.[150]

The fight against racial discrimination and segregation did not end with Dellande's defeat. Creole of color activists continued to organize against laws and practices that sought to separate people by color, limit African American political participation, and uphold white supremacy.[151] In 1886, a group of men from the downtown Creole section of New Orleans formed the Justice, Protective, Educational and Social Club "for the purpose of uniting and protecting ourselves, both socially and morally, and protecting our intellectual welfare, thereby inculcating a true sense of the importance of education, and uniting ourselves politically that our support and influence may be brought to bear where our interest and welfare can be advanced and our rights as citizens of this State and of the United States protected and respected." In 1887, a shoemaker named Homer Plessy served as the club's vice president.[152] Two years later, lawyer and notary Louis A. Martinet started the *Crusader*, a newspaper that followed in the activist vein of Trévigne's *L'Union* and *Tribune*. Trévigne, in fact, contributed to the *Crusader*, as did Rodolphe Desdunes. The paper carefully tracked political developments, and during the state legislative session of 1890, it trained its focus on a bill known as the Separate Car Act. With the passage of this bill, Martinet, Desdunes, Plessy, and a several other members of the Justice, Protective, Educational and Social Club

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[150] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 85-89; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 223-227.

[151] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 228; Keith Weldon Medley, *We as Freemen: Plessy v. Ferguson* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2003), 154; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 253-256.

[152] Quoted in "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute;" Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 115; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 30-31.

launched a coordinated challenge to racial segregation that reached the United States Supreme Court in the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson.*[153]

The Separate Car Act mandated railroad companies to enforce segregated seating in their trains with designated "white" and "colored" cars. Violators, whether individuals seated in the wrong car or railroad employees not enforcing the law, faced punishments of fines and jail time.[154] The *Crusader's* contributors recognized the injustice of this "barbarous measure" as well as the arbitrary enforcement of a law based on visible cues of race. Moreover, the paper warned, yielding to the Separate Car Act only made it easier for white legislators to more seriously erode the rights of African Americans. Thus, the *Crusader* protested the act, calling for boycotts of the railroad companies and the formulation of a test case to challenge the law in court.[155]

In September 1891, a group of eighteen Creoles of color formed the *Comité des Citoyens* or The Citizens' Committee for the Annulment of Act No. 111 Commonly Known as the Separate Car Law. The members included lawyers, business owners, teachers, and writers and drew from both older and younger generations of activists. One of the Committee's prime organizers, Rodolphe Desdunes, represented the younger generation of leadership while Aristide Mary, the initial financial backer of the Committee, was among the old guard. Mary was a political leader during Reconstruction, one-time candidate for governor, and a wealthy philanthropist. He generously provided funding to political groups, benevolent societies, charitable organizations, including the

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[153] Medley, *We as Freemen*, 103-104, 106-109, 118, 121, 125; Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 85, 114; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 256-257.

[154] Medley, *We as Freemen*, 95-96. The Separate Car Act came in the wake of similar measures passed in other Southern states, but its introduction in the House of Representatives was specifically tied to a political fight over the Louisiana Lottery Company. See Medley, 90-103.

[155] Medley, *We as Freemen*, 104, 107, 109, 114, 116-118, quote on 117; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 227-228.

Catholic Institution. Indeed, most of the Citizens' Committee members had connections to the Couvent School. Arthur Estèves served as president of both the *Comité des Citoyens* and the *Société Catholique*. Louis Joubert, Louis A. Martinet, and Eugène Luscy served on the school's Board of Directors. Firmin Christophe taught there. Rodolphe Desdunes, of course, attended the Catholic Institution and later served as a teacher and a director.[156] Desdunes' defiant and passionate *Crusader* articles denouncing segregation laws reveal the full impact of the political lessons imparted to Catholic Institution students by men like Armand Lanusse, Joanni Questy, and Paul Trévigne.[157] The Citizens' Committee utilized their connections to the many black benevolent societies and social organizations in New Orleans to raise additional money for their "endeavors to have that oppressive law annulled by the courts." In three months, the Committee amassed almost $3,000 from groups and individuals in towns throughout Louisiana as well as places as distant as California. Their fundraising success certainly offered "proof of public sentiment and determination."[158]

The Citizens' Committee set up two cases to contest the Separate Car Act. The first one involved the planned arrest of Rodolphe Desdunes' son, Daniel, on an interstate train trip. Judge John Ferguson dismissed the charges against Desdunes in 1892, ruling that regulation of interstate travel fell under the federal government's domain. The Committee's second case required Homer Plessy, a fellow member of the Justice, Protective, Educational and Social Club with Joubert and Estèves, to get arrested in the

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[156] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 257; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 23, 117-118, 121, 125, 127; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 126-128, 184-185; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 228-229; "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute."

[157] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 254-255, 258, 261; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 114-117.

[158] Medley, *We as Freemen*, 126-127, 130-131.

"white" car on an intrastate trip. Judge Ferguson also heard Plessy's case. He ruled that the Separate Car Act for travel within the state did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment because equal accommodations were provided to white and black passengers. The Louisiana Supreme Court upheld the decision. The Committee appealed and the case was eventually heard by the US Supreme Court. In 1896, the court again upheld Ferguson's initial ruling that "separate but equal" was indeed constitutional. This decision officially sanctioned segregation laws in the South. It would not be overturned until the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* case.[159]

Desdunes and fellow Committee members' fear that the Separate Car Law would lead to increased forms of segregation and discrimination came true in the wake of the *Plessy* ruling. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Louisiana legislature had passed laws that segregated most public accommodations. Through the addition of various voter qualifications, the new state constitution composed in 1898 effectively disenfranchised African American men.[160] Praising these suffrage regulations, the governor made no effort to veil their purpose: "The white supremacy for which we have so long struggled...is now crystallized into the Constitution as a fundamental part and parcel of that organic instrument."[161] Violence enforced these strictures and further maintained control of black people's labor and movement throughout Louisiana.

The Citizens' Committee disbanded not long after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of racial segregation. In a final published statement, the Committee explained that "Notwithstanding this decision, which was rendered contrary to our expectations, we, as

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[159] Medley, *We as Freemen*, 28, 31, 121, 135, 140-143, 156, 163, 167, 200, 202-203; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 188-189; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 228.

[160] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 281-282; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 209-214; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 259.

[161] Quoted in Medley, *We as Freemen*, 212.

freemen, still believe that we were right, and our cause was sacred...In defending the cause of liberty, we met with defeat, but not with ignominy."[162] Even in the face of bitter disappointment, Creole of color activists in New Orleans maintained their pride and determination to fight for their rights as humans and as citizens. Their designation as "freemen" echoed their forebears in the free black militia who presented themselves to Governor Claiborne in 1804 as "free citizens of Louisiana," expecting their "personal and political freedom" to be honored by the United States.[163] Although the struggle to realize their vision of a society built on equality and free of racial prejudice fell short, it left a powerful legacy for future African American activists.[164] Perhaps as a gesture to nurturing the next generation of radical community leaders, the *Comité des Citoyens* donated twenty dollars of its leftover funds to the Catholic Institution.[165]

The Evolution of an Institution

The twentieth century marked a gradual change in the administration and control of *L'Institution Catholique*. White Catholic clergy replaced the Afro-Creole-dominated teaching staff and Board of Directors over time, and the school eventually became attached to a parish. New names for the school accompanied these administrative adjustments, although alumni continued to refer to it as the Catholic Institution.[166] Financial difficulties were the immediate cause of these changes to the school. The

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[162] Cossé Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 281; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 206.

[163] "Address from the Free People of Color," January 1804 in Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, 174.

[164] Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 260; Arnold Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans," in Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans*, 271-273.

[165] Citizens' Committee, "Report of the Proceedings for the Annulment Act 111 of 1890," Box 1, Folder 13, Charles Barthelemy Rousseve Papers, ARC, NOLA; Medley, *We as Freemen*, 206.

[166] See, for example, Alvin Aubry, "Know Your Educators," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 14, 1846 in the George Longe Papers, Box 40, Folder 3, ARC.

postbellum descendants of free people of color experienced a general decline in wealth in the aftermath of the war and Reconstruction.[167] Legal and extra-legal Jim Crow practices also had a negative economic effect on African Americans, which was further exacerbated by the Great Depression. Indeed, the changes undergone by the school stemmed from the infiltration of segregation in all arenas of daily life. Between 1895 and 1920, the Archdiocese in New Orleans re-aligned its churches, parishes, and parochial schools to accommodate segregation. Catholics of color fought against the creation of all-black parishes, but under the increasing pressures of a hardening color line they found little recourse to challenge the Church's new racial configuration.[168] Against this backdrop of segregation, *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigent* evolved into a black Catholic school.

The Catholic Institution survived the Civil War in tact but suffered during Reconstruction. Although the school served as a training ground for the radical Creole leaders who successfully pressed for integrated public schools in the postwar period, their achievement, brief as it was, diminished the Catholic Institution's necessity. Most of the children who would have attended the Couvent school (and paid tuition) during the 1870s went to public schools instead. *L'Institution Catholique* "was revived," according Mitchell, "only after the last efforts to prevent school segregation had been exhausted and the 'alarming effects' of segregation had become manifest."[169] The Afro-Creole community felt those effects almost immediately. By the early 1880s, just a few rundown

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[167] Loren Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years," in Dorman, *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South,* 61.

[168] James Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 179, 190, 193-194, 197, 206-207, 217-220; John Bernard Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools: The Josephite Parishes of New Orleans During the Jim Crow Era," in *Education in Louisiana*, ed. Michael G. Wade (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1999), 330-332, 336-337.

[169] Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 229; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*,145.

buildings sufficed as black schools in the downtown faubourgs and the all-white school board ended education for African American students at the sixth grade. Faced with these grim circumstances, a group of men worked to restore the Catholic Institution to its former position as the top school for children of color in the Third District.[170]

On June 14, 1882, nine representatives arrived at the notary office of Octave de Armas for the purpose of restructuring the "Catholic Association for the instruction of indigent children." Forming the new Board of Directors, the group explained that "since some time past there has been no Directors or Managers duly elected to said Association, which therefore is threatened with extinction unless re-organized." Auguste Cheveau served as president of the revamped association with Ludger Boguille, one of the school's original instructors, as Vice-President. Rodolphe Desdunes' brother, Pierre Aristide, was one of three "ordinary Directors." The Assistant District Attorney approved the re-incorporation of the *Sociéte* on June 23.[171]

The Catholic Church, however, did not so readily accept the new board's authority. On July 20, 1882 the Archbishop Napoléon-Joseph Perché informed the *Société Catholique* that because it "had violated its contract with Mr. Maenhaut," he will take measures to regain possession of the house at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union Streets.[172] The board members resisted the Archbishop's threat to take away the school. In 1884, Perché's successor, Francis Xavier Leray, also attempted to appropriate

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[170] Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 329; Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 94; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*,145. Although white schools fared much better than black schools, as a whole, the Louisiana public school system suffered with the Redeemers in power. The Democrat-dominated legislature cut the budget for the entire system so severely that in 1883 every public school in New Orleans was forced to close for a semester. See Logsdon and Devore, 91-96.

[171] *Reorganizat.n of the Catholic Associat.n for the instruct.n of indigent children*, June 14, 1882, O. de Armas, Volume 103, Act 48, NARC.

[172] See the two attachments included in *Reorganizat.n of the Catholic Associat.n for the instruct.n of indigent children*, June 14, 1882.

the school and went so far as to file a petition with the New Orleans district court. Again, the Board of Directors managed to convince the Archbishop to allow them to continue to administer the school. This new slate of officers included future members of the *Comité des Citoyens*—Arthur Estéves, Rodolphe Desdunes, Eugène Luscy—as well as two long-time supporters of the school, Louis Nelson Fouché and Armand Duhart.[173] "By their integrity and dedication," Desdunes wrote in 1911, "these Creoles rallied the population around them, and thus they were able to inaugurate a new era of prosperity and independence for the institution."[174]

In 1894, Estéves oversaw the erection of a new building at the corner of Grands Hommes (now Dauphine) and Union (soon to be Touro) Streets. Containing a basement and a sizeable hall, the two story edifice cost $12,000. Much of the funding came from the generous bequests of Thomy Lafon and Aristide Mary, both wealthy Creoles of color. Other property bequeathed to the school from Lafon was rented, and the money used to pay for maintenance of the school as well as the salaries of teachers and other school employees.[175] The Directors hung a marble plaque honoring Couvent, Lafon, and Mary in the school. At the dedication ceremony, Archbishop Francis Janssens, who served in this position from 1888 until his death in 1897, blessed the new building.[176]

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[173] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 145-146; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 229; Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 219.

[174] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 145-146.

[175] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*,141; "History of the Catholic Institute"; Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish." City directories throughout the 1870s and early 1880s listed the school's address at 393 Dauphine Street, but the notary record recognizing the reorganization of the Association still referred to the corner as "Great Men and Union." Grands Hommes became the extension of Dauphine in 1852. The year the new school building went up, Union Street was renamed Touro. See *Alphabetical Index of Changes in Street Names, Old and New Period 1852 to Current Date, Dec. 1st 1938*, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, accessed at http://www.neworleanspubliclibrary.org/~nopl/facts/streetnames/namesa.htm.

[176] Sr. Georgiana Rockwell, *Vision-Reality: Madame Couvent l'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents, Mother M. Katherine Drexel- St. Louis School, New Orleans*, manuscript, (Bensalem: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1987), 7 in Box 4, Folder 7, Charles Barthelemy Rousseve Papers, ARC.

Unlike his predecessors, Archbishop Janssens did not threaten the existence of *L'Institution Catholique*. Janssens, in fact, sought to alleviate the condition of black Catholics in New Orleans. Although the churches remained integrated after the Civil War, Catholics of color experienced increasing discrimination from priests and white parishioners. Segregated seating and parochial schools open only to white children proliferated during the postbellum period. Janssens believed in the spiritual equality of black and white members of the church and spoke out against African American oppression. He also recognized that black Catholics needed better access to schools. Janssens wanted to provide such services and prejudice-free worship environments to his black parishioners to keep them from leaving the Catholic Church all together. His solution was to create separate, all-black churches and parochial schools. He believed this would give black Catholics much-needed resources and protection from harassment by white Catholics. This plan also satisfied the resolution passed by Third Plenary Council of American Bishops in 1884 that called for segregated parishes and parochial schools throughout the United States as the best way to serve and protect black Catholics.[177]

Janssens put his plan into action with the establishment of St. Katherine's Church in 1895. The Archbishop secured funding from Katherine Drexel, an heiress who founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and dedicated her wealth and religious order to aid African Americans and Native Americans. Drexel purchased the old St. Joseph's Church after the congregation relocated to a larger building. At the dedication Mass for the opening of the first separate black parish in New Orleans, Archbishop Janssens "affirmed his love for African Americans and their equality before God," but he "also stressed that

[177] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 164-173, quote on 173; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 327-329.

black Catholics were only invited, not forced, to attend St. Katherine's." By offering St. Katherine's as an option rather than an obligation, Janssens hoped to appease critics who viewed separate churches as an extension of the concurrent efforts of white lawmakers to mandate segregation in public accommodations.[178]

Those critics were the overwhelming majority of Black Catholics in New Orleans. Janssens' plan outraged Catholics of color, who adamantly opposed the creation of separate parishes. In 1894 a group of 150 black parishioners, crossing ethnocultural, class, and generational divides, sent a petition to Janssens in 1894 to protest "the injustice designed against us, in the endeavor to establish a church, exclusively for colored people in the Parish of St. Joseph, against our wishes or consent."[179] The most vocal opponents were Creoles of color, led by Rodolphe Desdunes and the *Comité des Citoyens*. Janssens' establishment of St. Katherine's occurred in the midst of the Citizens' Committee fight against segregated train cars. Desdunes vehemently argued against the establishment of a "Church St. Jim Crow" in the *Crusader*. The move to separate churches, Desdunes reasoned, created distinctions between the races that only further bolstered racist ideas of African American inferiority and justified the denial of their political and civil rights. When the inundation of petitions, articles, and even personal appeals by members of the Citizens' Committee failed to convince Janssens to halt the St. Katherine's project, Desdunes urged his readers to boycott the church and publicly refuse Drexel's donation.[180]

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[178] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 173-175, quote on 175.

[179] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 185.

[180] "Citizens' Committee," The *Crusader*, February 14, 1895, clipping in Box 2, Folder 28, Charles Barthelemy Rousseve Papers, ARC; Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 179, 181, 184-186, 188-189.

Although the black Catholics' protest campaign did stop the establishment of a separate black parish in New Orleans, it did successfully prevent Janssens from founding others. Most Catholics of color refused to attend St. Katherine's after it opened, continuing, instead, to remain in their integrated parishes. Attendance at the first separate black church remained low through 1915. Janssens' successor, Louis Placide Chappell, returned to previous Archbishops' attitude of neglect towards African American parishioners which further held segregation in Catholic churches at bay. It would not be until 1909, under the administration of Archbishop James Blenk, that a second separate black church was built.[181]

Between 1909 and 1920, Blenk and his successor, John William Shaw, oversaw the establishment of seven all-black parishes in New Orleans. Like Janssens, Blenk and Shaw believed that separate white and black parishes offered the only means to adequately serve African American parishioners. In 1909, Blenk assisted a white Josephite priest named Pierre Lebeau in purchasing the old Mater Dolorosa Church in the uptown neighborhood of Carrollton after the congregation moved to a new building. Prior to the relocation, the congregation was integrated, but upon completion of the new building, the white members voted to exclude the black members. The all-black St. Dominic's Church opened in the old Mater Dolorosa space in March 1909. The founding of St. Dominic's signaled the beginning of the end to integrated Catholic Churches in New Orleans. Between 1915 and 1920, six additional separate black parishes had been created, and within a few years the majority of Catholics of color attended segregated churches. In many cases, overt rejection and exclusion by white priests and parishioners forced black Catholics from their original churches to those designated as "black." While

[181] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 179, 189-196, 220.

individual acts of resistance to separate churches did continue throughout the Jim Crow era in New Orleans, the color line had clearly been drawn within the Catholic Church by 1920.[182]

Black Catholics found that separate parishes did offer some advantages to the increasing discrimination they faced in integrated churches. African American parishioners could attend Mass without the humiliation of separate pews or other forms of harassment that they often had to endure at integrated churches. Separate churches also provided access to financial resources through funding sources created specifically to support African American missions. This included money for parochial schools. In integrated parishes, schools were often closed to black children. Conforming to the Third Plenary Council's mandate that every parish have a school, the separate black parishes founded between 1909 and 1920 all included education facilities. Indeed, access to Catholic schools often attracted African American parishioners to separate black churches and made their existence easier to bear. Just three years after it opened in 1917, Corpus Christi's parochial school enrolled 900 children. By 1925, New Orleans contained a black Catholic high school and college.[183]

The all-black churches, however, had to be staffed by white priests whose order administered exclusively to African American congregations. The St. Joseph's Society of Sacred Heart was one such order. With Blenk's approval, Josephite priests operated most of the newly-created separate black parishes. The same policy affected parochial schools. Katherine Drexel's Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and other white female religious

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[182] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 193-196, 205-207, 216-218, 220-221, 226-228; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 332-334.

[183] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 222-224; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 327, 333-334, 336-338.

orders taught at black Catholic schools, although New Orleans' own Sisters of the Holy Family, an order founded in the 1840s by free women of color, maintained several schools. The Josephites and Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament offered their own funding to support their black parishes, which meant Catholics of color had to rely less on the Archdiocese for assistance.[184] Yet, it could not be denied that attending churches and schools run by white priests and nuns underscored "the segregated and inferior position of the black church members" in the Catholic Church.[185]

The segregation of Catholic Churches in the city formed the setting in which the first significant change to affect *L'Institution Catholique* occurred. On September 29, 1915 a massive hurricane hit New Orleans. The storm demolished the school building constructed in 1894. The Board of Directors immediately began fundraising to rebuild the Catholic Institution. Within a year, Association members had collected over $1200 from African American donors and benevolent societies. This sum enabled partial repairs to the building, but the board required another $2,000 to complete the restoration. The Board of Directors placed advertisements in the newspapers to publicize their plight, but the necessary money did not come through.[186]

To preserve the sixty-eight-year-old school, the board solicited financial assistance from Katherine Drexel, the founder and Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the same woman whom Rodolphe Desdunes denounced in the *Crusader* for funding the first separate black Catholic church in the city. More recently, Drexel had purchased the former site of Southern University and used the property for

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[184] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 199-201, 222; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 333-334.

[185] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 200.

[186] "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute;" Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 219.

another all-black church, Blessed Sacrament, as well as Xavier High School and eventually Xavier University.[187] Board members brokered a deal with Drexel through Father Samuel Kelly, a white Josephite priest. Kelly had recently moved to New Orleans from Mississippi where he had organized several churches for African Americans. After first serving as priest at St. Dominic's, Kelly purchased property in the downtown area with the help of Drexel to found his own black parish, Corpus Christi. Kelly's parish quickly became the largest black Catholic church in New Orleans.[188] Drexel and Kelly met with the board members on November 5, 1916 and agreed to terms that provided the Association with the necessary funds to reconstruct the building.[189]

Mother Drexel's aid came with a price. In order to receive the money, the board members had to agree to several conditions. Although the Board of Directors maintained control of the school, Drexel required that it be placed under the direction of a priest and that the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament staff the school. This staffing mandate removed the Creole of color teachers and principal and placed whites in charge of the daily management of the school. Drexel also reorganized the school, reducing it to only two grades with the promise of adding higher grade levels as funding and staffing became available. To sustain the school, then, the Board of Directors gave up a large degree of autonomy over staffing, curriculum, and administrative decisions. In addition, Drexel required that the name of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* be changed to

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[187] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 174-175, 186, 189, 221; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 331, 336-336; "Mother Mary Katherine- Missionary Angel," *The Xavier Alumni Voice*, March 1953, 15 in Box 3, Folder 5, Charles Barthelemy Rousseve Papers, ARC.

[188] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 219-220; Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 336; "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute."

[189] "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute."

St. Louis, in honor of her sister, Louise Drexell Morrell.[190] The act of renaming signified a break from the school's decades-long history as an institution for children of color successfully run by people of African descent and a clear move away from the intentions of its original benefactor, Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent.

After consenting to Drexel's conditions, the Board of Directors published a pamphlet in 1916 entitled, "History of the Catholic Institution, Dauphine and Touro Streets, Destroyed by the Hurricane September 1915, Rebuilt in 1916." This publication was likely created as promotional material to announce the reconstruction and reorganization of the school. It recounted the history of the Catholic Institution from its beginnings as a bequest from "Widow Couvent, a highly respectable old colored lady" to its current state of destruction. It explained that the board still needed money to rebuild but that Mother Drexel, "known as the Great Benefactress of the Colored People of New Orleans and elsewhere," had "promised her undivided assistance in the completion of the Catholic Orphan Indigent School." The pamphlet also acknowledged Father Kelly's role in securing Drexel's aid and referred to him as the school's "spiritual director."[191]

More than just positive publicity, this booklet was a conscious effort on the part of the Board of Directors to preserve the institutional, social, and political history of their school. In addition to the story of the Catholic Institution's founding, the pamphlet listed the names of all previous teachers, principals, and members of the board. It detailed the credentials of the current directors, highlighting the number of years these men had served the school (some as many as thirty) and the network of social organizations and benevolent societies in which they were actively involved. The resumes of board

[190] Rockwell, *Vision-Reality*, 10; Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish;" Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 219-220.

[191] "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute."

members projected a clear sense of a community's dedication and pride in the school. Through its brief biographies of men like Arthur Estèves and Aristide Mary, the pamphlet also emphasized the school's role in the development of radical political leaders. Estèves' entry focused on his work with the Justice, Protective, Educational and Social Club. To remind its readers that the struggle for equality continued, the pamphlet quoted the Club's statement of purpose at length. It also acknowledged the deeds of "active workers" like Gustave Morales, Jr., a professional tinsmith and alum, who would provide the tin work for the new building and Lizardie Diaz, another graduate who currently taught at the school.[192] These former students returned to *L'Institution Catholique* to assist in its recovery and continue its valuable work. The Board of Directors did what they felt was necessary to save the Couvent School. To counteract the significant changes wrought by that decision they preserved their past in a printed pamphlet.

On August 26, 1917, Reverend J. M. Jeanmard dedicated the new building, and St. Louis School opened for its first day of classes on September 10. Two Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and four lay teachers worked at the school. Despite Drexel's recommended limit of two grade levels, the school opened with classes in four grades. Initially, attendance numbers were minimal, but by the end of the first year, enrollment had doubled to 151 students and fifth grade had been added. In 1919, two Josephite priests established Holy Redeemer parish, an all-black church for the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood. At Drexel's prompting, the St. Louis School became affiliated with the parish soon after its founding, although the school remained a separate entity. In1921, the student population reached 298, and the following year saw the introduction of the

[192] "History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute."

seventh and eighth grades. Enrollment remained around 300 students throughout the 1920s.[193]

Despite the Board of Directors' diminished influence, it still had the authority and determination to repel another attempt by the Archbishop to take over the school. The fact that St. Louis School remained under the authority of a lay board frustrated Archbishop Shaw. He preferred that the school's administrative hierarchy align with that of other parochial schools, in which the nuns answered to the parish priest. With the St. Louis school, a lay board of black men oversaw the white nuns. In 1920, the board requested access to a bequest of $300 left to the school by Armand Thomas for a playground. Shaw refused to turn over the money unless the board relinquished its power to the Archdiocese. The directors, however, adamantly refused "to surrender their rights," declaring that they "felt it a duty of their race" to maintain the board. Shaw retaliated by withholding the bequest. Although they never received the money, the directors retained their position as supervisors of the St. Louis School for another quarter century.[194]

The St. Louis School struggled during the Great Depression, along with the rest of the nation. The financial difficulties of the early 1930s once again led to changes to the administration of the school. In the immediate aftermath of the stock market crash, the Board of Directors wrote to Mother Drexel: "Having considered carefully the peculiar problem facing us and having kept in mind the unselfish interest and devotion which you and the Sisters of Blessed Sacrament have displayed at times in regard to the education of our people we have decided that their best interests would be safeguarded if it were possible to transfer to your order the ownership and operation of the school." Drexel did

[193] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish;" Rockwell, *Vision-Reality*, 14-17.
[194] Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 225, quotes on 226; Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish."

not accept the offer, but she agreed to keep the Sisters in the school for as long as possible. By 1932, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament could no longer support the St. Louis School. Father Callery, the school's spiritual director, managed to continue operations at the school through the assistance of the Sisters of Holy Ghost and Mary Immaculate. Founded in Texas in 1893 by Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, the Sisters of the Holy Ghost previously had taught at another black school in New Orleans. The nuns moved into the former Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament convent and began teaching at St. Louis School. In 1938, the directors requested that the Holy Ghost Sisters take financial responsibility of the school, but the order was not in the position to do so. Despite these fiscal troubles, the school continued to provide an education to African American children. The St. Louis school boasted a talented student choir that was known throughout the city and often performed for local events. When the National Eucharistic Congress was held in New Orleans in 1938, the St. Louis students proudly marched behind the Blessed Sacrament.[195]

Unfortunately, the Board of Directors never managed to gain financial security. By 1945, the St. Louis School was completely insolvent. To keep the school open, Holy Redeemer church fully incorporated it into the parish. The school's name changed to St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer, but it was commonly referred to as Holy Redeemer School for short. Although the association between the school and Holy Redeemer parish stretched back to 1919, the reorganization in 1945 officially rendered the institution a

[195] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish." For more information of the National Eucharistic Congress held in New Orleans see *The Eighth National Eucharistic Congress New Orleans, Louisiana October 17-20, 1938* (Marrero, LA: The Hope Haven Press, 1941).

parochial school. This marked the end of the all-black Board of Directors. The administration of the school transferred in full to the priest at Holy Redeemer.[196]

The renegotiated relationship with Holy Redeemer parish did lead to improved conditions at the St. Louis School. The building constructed in 1917 needed major repairs and the size of the student body required additional space. By the 1950s, over 600 children attended classes in the school and the convent. Marilyn Medley, a sixth-grade student, described the "small and overcrowded" classrooms as "dark and dreary, with holes in the wall" and broken windows. The Fire Marshal condemned the building in 1956. With the financial assistance of Archbishop Joseph Rummel, the Josephites, the Commission for Indian and Negro Missions, and the American Board of Catholic Missions, Holy Redeemer constructed a new building on the corner of Dauphine (Grands Hommes) and Touro (Union) Streets. Medley reported that during the construction phase, the teachers held classes anywhere space could be found, including Holy Redeemer church and hall, its choir loft, a rented dry goods store, and even a former bar in the French Quarter.[197] On November 26, 1956, classes resumed in a "modern, well-equipped three story" school.[198] After a century, the school's list of benefactors had grown long, but Medley and her classmates recognized Couvent's original vision for her property to be a center of education. Medley wrote, "My school is more than just a school. It is a monument to the dream of a wonderful woman, Marie Couvent. I know that she must be just as proud of my school as I am."[199]

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[196] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish."

[197] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish." Quotes from Medley are included in Gallher's pamphlet. See original article by Marilyn Medley entitled, "A Dream Comes True," in the Josephite journal, *The Colored Harvest*, Vol. 69, no. 3 (March, 1957).

[198] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish." This building still stands today.

[199] Marilyn Medley, "A Dream Comes True." Also quoted in Keith Weldon Medley, "Bishop Perry Middle School: Madame Couvent's Legacy."

By the 1950s, ten parochial schools served over 4,000 African American students in New Orleans, and this "extensive black parochial school system had become a mark of pride."[200] Although at times these parochial schools suffered from limited funding and aging facilities, they offered black Catholics an alternative to the city's public school system. Most African American students, however, attended the segregated public schools. Public education in New Orleans had been "separate" since 1877, but it was never "equal." Sixty-eight public schools existed for white students in 1910, but there were only sixteen schools for black students. A decade later, one in five public schools was designated for African Americans.[201] In 1938, the Louisiana State Superintendent of Education summed up the prevailing white attitude toward African American education over the past sixty years: "[T]here is no serious intention in most parishes to provide school facilities for Negro children."[202]

The neglect of black children's educational needs manifested itself in overcrowded classes, deteriorating wooden frame buildings, and a general lack of financial support. Between 1900 and 1914, all black schooling ended at fifth grade. The city did not provide African Americans with a public high school until 1917. Named McDonogh No. 35, it remained the only black public high school until 1942. McDonogh No. 35 opened in a previously designated white school originally built in 1882, and it continued to use that same building until Hurricane Betsy destroyed it in 1965. In addition to the rundown facilities and deplorable classroom conditions, Louisiana schools utilized a separate curriculum for white and black students. Many black schools

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[200] Alberts, "Black Catholic Schools," 340.

[201] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 182-183, 185.

[202] Quoted in Phillip Johnson, "Toward a Civil Rights Agenda: Charles S. Johnson's Forgotten Study of Black Schools in Louisiana," in Wade, *Education in Louisiana*, 406.

maintained white teachers, and African American teachers were paid less than their white counterparts.[203]

Despite their severely curtailed political voice, African Americans worked tirelessly to improve their children's access to education. They formed local and state-wide organizations and joined national groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to lobby the school board. These groups repeatedly petitioned for increased public funding, better maintained buildings, and new schools to solve overcrowding issues. The struggle for improvements was a slow process, but the tenacity of African American community leaders paid off. They successfully pushed for the reinstatement of the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. They then advocated for secondary schools as well as night classes. African American organizers in New Orleans also pressed the school board to hire more black teachers and to pay African American instructors the same as white instructors. While these efforts worked within the Jim Crow system, black activists eventually sought to end segregated schools all together.[204]

George Longe was among these influential community leaders who actively worked to improve segregated black schools in the city. Longe attended the Catholic Institution when he was a child. As a long-time public educator in New Orleans, Longe carried on the activist tradition of earlier Catholic Institution alumni and administrators. He organized night classes at the Joseph Craig School, developed a curriculum that included African American studies, and led a successful petition for a heated, eight-room

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[203] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 182, 184-185, 189, 191-192, 205, 207; Ernest J. Middleton, "The Louisiana Education Association, 1901-1970," *Journal of Negro Education,* 47 (1978): 366.

[204] Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 179, 182, 187, 191, 195-196, 205-207, 225, 232.

school to be built in the 1930s.[205] As president of the Louisiana Colored Teacher's Association (LCTA), a state-wide organization of black educators, Longe rallied support for a campaign to equalize teacher salaries using the court system. The LCTA hired the NAACP's lawyers to oversee the legal fight. In 1941 Longe and three other black principals helped set up the first of sixteen suits filed throughout the state to contest African American teachers' unequal pay. In 1942, a judge ruled in favor of the teachers.[206] The local lawyer for these cases was A. P. Tureaud, a Creole of color leader in the NAACP. Although Tureaud did not attend the Catholic Institution, he was a "legatee of a proud creole protest tradition," following in the footsteps of men like Paul Trévigne, Rodolphe Desdunes, and fellow lawyer, Louis A. Martinet.[207]

Tureaud's success with the salary equalization case encouraged the NAACP and the LCTA to file additional suits focused on the unequal education facilities provided for black children.[208] By the early 1950s, these equalization suits began to explicitly challenge the constitutionality of segregated schools. In 1952, Tureaud filed a desegregation suit against the New Orleans school board on behalf of Earl Benjamin Bush. The *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board* case was similar to the five suits that became the *Brown v. Board of Education* case heard by the US Supreme Court in 1954. The *Brown* decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, ruling that "separate educational

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[205] Aubry, "Know Your Educators."

[206] Rachel Emanuel and Alexander P. Tureaud, Jr., *A More Noble Cause: A.P. Tureaud and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Louisiana: a Personal Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 101-103, 107; Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Right s Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 63, 71; Various newspaper clippings in Box 40, Folder 12, George Longe Papers, ARC.

[207] Arnold Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," quote on 217; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 63, 65.

[208] Middleton, "The Louisiana Education Association," 372-373; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 107, Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 226. In 1947, the LCTA changed its name to the Louisiana Education Association.

facilities were inherently unequal." The Louisiana legislature immediately passed a torrent of laws in order to subvert the *Brown* ruling. Tureaud continued to pursue the *Bush* case to force implementation of desegregation. In 1956, the verdict was decided in favor of Bush, but the school board, supported by the newly-created White Citizens' Council, refused to integrate the New Orleans public schools.[209]

It was in this atmosphere of white hostility to African Americans' preliminary dismantling of Jim Crow that Holy Redeemer School planned to construct a new building. The project met with resistance from white people in the surrounding neighborhood. Because the planned building required a zoning modification, property owners protested the school to the zoning board. Critics of the new building "complained the school brought Negroes into an essentially white neighborhood."[210] The project won approval despite this opposition, but the complaints point to the demographic shifts that had occurred in the Faubourg Marigny. No longer was the corner of Dauphine and Touro in the heart of Sirnir's free black/Creole sector.[211] The white protests to the "new" black school were also indicative of the resistance African Americans faced in their struggle for civil rights over the next decade.

Through a long, drawn out process, New Orleans' public and parochial school systems were eventually desegregated. After years of political and legal maneuvering, the school board finally agreed to the token integration of the first grade at two white public schools by four African American students in 1960. This initial integration effort sparked

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[209] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 108, Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 232, 235-239; Emanuel and Tureaud, *A More Noble Cause*, 155-156, 195-196; Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," 280-281.

[210] "Catholic Negro School Sought," *The Times-Picayune*, February 23, 1956.

[211] Campanella, *Bienville's Delimma*, 174, 176-177. Creoles of color remained in the downtown faubourgs, but they were gradually pushed further from the river towards the lake.

angry white protests. Due to threats and harassment by crowds of white parents, federal marshals had to escort the four black students to the buildings. Practically all of the white children left the two schools by the end of the first month. Yet, desegregation continued and the following year saw less outright protest. Instead, numerous private schools opened to accommodate white students who refused to attend integrated schools. It was not until 1970 that all grade levels in New Orleans public schools had been desegregated.[212]

The Catholic schools integrated in 1962. Although Archbishop Rummel first called for integration in 1957, he held off in the face of pressure from white parishioners and the state legislature. In the wake of the New Orleans school crisis, an interracial group of laity organized the Catholic Council on Human Relations (CCHR) in 1961 and successfully pressed for integration of the parochial school system.[213] The CCHR contained three hundred members, including Creole of color lawyer and civil rights activist, Ernest "Dutch" Morial. As a boy, Morial attended the St. Louis School. He would eventually serve as New Orleans' first mayor of African descent.[214] The Archdiocese chose to integrate on a much wider scale than the public schools, in an effort to decrease white resistance. In September 1862, sixty black students attended twenty white Catholic schools. Some white parishioners protested desegregation, but overall the parochial school integration was relatively peaceful. Like the public schools, however, Catholic schools did not undergo complete integration for several years, and white

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[212] Logsdon and Devore, Crescent City Schools, 244-245, 250, 252, 260-266; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 234, 237, 239, 243-244, 247-248, 254, 261; Justin Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights in Catholic Louisiana, 1938-1970" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007), 195-196, 257, 276.

[213] Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights," 157, 198-199, 207-208, 245-248.

[214] Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights," 248; Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," 291-292; Medley, "Bishop Perry Middle School Madame Couvent's Legacy." Like his mentor, A. P. Tureaud, Morial carried on the tradition of Afro-Creole protest "in his background, his vision, and his willingness to challenge racial barriers." See Hirsch, 291.

students frequently left for schools without African American student populations. Moreover, the integration process for both systems worked in only one direction, with black students attending white schools. Often, the consolidation of schools in response to desegregation resulted in the closure of both public and parochial black facilities.[215]

In 1965, "desegregation was more of a symbolic achievement than a reality" in the parochial schools.[216] That year, Hurricane Betsy hit the city, causing widespread damage and flooding from breached levees. The storm destroyed Holy Redeemer church, and it was never rebuilt. Holy Redeemer School, however, survived the hurricane. Without a parish, it came under control of the Archdiocese.[217] The school weathered the storm of integration, as well. For the next thirty years it operated as Holy Redeemer Elementary. With declining attendance over this period, the Archdiocese decided to shutter the school for good in 1994. That same year the Society of St. Edmund planned to open a school for African American boys in New Orleans. The Archdiocese allowed the Edmundites to utilize the Holy Redeemer building rent free. On August 22, 1994, Bishop Perry Middle School opened at the corner of Dauphine and Touro. The Edmundites named their new school in honor of Bishop Harold Perry, the first African American bishop in the twentieth century who served as an Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of New Orleans.[218]

In its most basic goals, the Edmundite program at Bishop Perry Middle School shared Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's vision of a free school for orphans of color on her

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[215] Poché, Religion, Race, and Rights," 259-262, 268-272, 288-289; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 256-261.

[216] Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights," 267.

[217] Gallaher, "St. Louis School of Holy Redeemer Parish."

[218] Medley, "Bishop Perry Middle School: Madame Couvent's Legacy;" Leslie Williams, "School Aims to Rescue At-Risk Black Boys," *Times-Picayune*, May 21, 1994; Peter Finney, Jr., "Edmundites to Open Free School in Fall," *Clarion Herald*, May 19, 1994; "Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan," 3, 10, 14.

property. Modeled after the Jesuit Nativity Mission Center in New York City, the school provided a free education for African American boys from impoverished households. Bishop Perry aimed to assist "academically and socially at risk" students in a Catholic school environment.[219] The middle school not only matched Couvent's original intentions, it also evoked the first institution opened on her land in its structure, curriculum, and overall goals. Like *L'Institution Catholique*, a Board of Directors administered Bishop Perry. Both Catholic and Protestant students from all over the Greater New Orleans area attended the school. Bishop Perry provided its pupils with a liberal arts education reminiscent of the Catholic Institution's "*éducation pratique, morale et religieuse.*"[220] The curriculum emphasized training in technology fields, taught "Christian values in the Roman Catholic tradition," and honed leadership skills. It also sought to inculcate in its students "an awareness and understanding of their African American heritage, with a knowledge and respect for other cultures and preparedness to function in America's multicultural society."[221] This objective echoed the Catholic Institution leaders who taught their students to see themselves as members of a broader Atlantic World through their own Afro-Creole history.

Like all three previous incarnations of the school, Bishop Perry relied on outside funding sources to operate. The Society of St. Edmund fully funded the school in the first year, but provided less money each subsequent year with the intention that it would eventually become self-supporting. The Edmundites wanted "the local community [to] gradually take ownership of the school."[222] In 2000, the six-year-old school put together a

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[219] "Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan," quote on 3,10.
[220] *Prospectus de l'Institution Catholique.*
[221] "Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan," 4, 12,
[222] "Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan," 10.

five-year-business plan with its major goals, funding strategies, and budget projections. Although it identified challenges to achieving its goals, the Board of Directors could not predict the devastating arrival of Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005. The school building survived the intense winds and severe flooding. Bishop Perry reopened for a brief time after the storm, but many of its students and its local donors had been displaced in the aftermath. Ultimately, the school lacked the funding to continue. It closed permanently at the end of the summer of 2006.[223]

The Archdiocese of New Orleans continues to own the property at the corner of Dauphine and Touro Streets. Between 2006 and 2012, the fifty-year-old Holy Redeemer School building housed an alternative school for pregnant teens. Named St. Gerard Majella for the patron saint of expectant mothers, the school continued to serve a highly vulnerable student population. In 2014, the Archdiocese, under the leadership of Father William Maestri, opened the Bishop Perry Community Center in the space. The Center offers a variety of services for people in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood, including food and clothing, professional training, cultural programs, and a health clinic. Mass is held in the chapel each day, but people of all faiths are welcome at the Center. Although Couvent's property is no longer utilized specifically for a school or specifically for African Americans, the Bishop Perry Community Center does provide education through tutoring and GED classes and it seeks to help those in need, much like Couvent intended to aid the "indigent orphans" in her community.[224]

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[223] "Bishop Perry Middle School Business Plan," 3-9, 17-21, 25-28; Steve Ritea, "Bishop Perry Catholic School to Close—Tuition-free Academy Lost Donors after the Storm," *Times-Picayune*, March 30, 2006; "Lack of Students, Donors Closes New Orleans Schools, Eve Troeh, *News and Notes*, aired on July 21, 2006, on *National Public Radio*, accessed October 18, 2014, http://www.npr.org/templates/story /story.php ?storyId=5572807.

[224] Sheila Stroup, "Bishop Perry Center Brings Help and Hope to Downtown Neighborhood in New Orleans," *Times-Picayune*, July 12, 2014, accessed at http://www.nola.com/religion/index.ssf/2014/07

On November 12, 1832, Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent instructed that her corner lot in the Faubourg Marigny forever be utilized for a school. This charge was kept for over 150 years, despite financial stress and natural disasters, war and political upheaval. During that time, thousands of African American children received an education, often for free. The remarkable endurance of the site as a school for black students is a testament to the vision of an illiterate, former slave, the tireless efforts of generations of people of African descent determined to provide their children with an education, and the compassion of white Catholic priests and nuns who offered their services and monetary support to keep the school open. For free people of color and their Afro-Creole descendants, *L'Institution Catholique* was a place where a community nurtured future activists, developing and passing on its radical protest tradition. An unwavering belief in the power of education to challenge racial prejudice and combat inequality formed a key component of that tradition. Couvent's bequest allowed Creole of color leaders to translate a shared value of learning into an actual education program. Although the Catholic Institution gradually evolved into a parochial school, it continued to provide an education to black children at a time when conditions in the public schools were dismal at best. As Bishop Perry Middle School, the corner of Dauphine and Touro again housed a school that served "the neediest of New Orleans' sons."[225] More than simply a plot of real estate, or the frame for a school, Couvent's lot in the Marigny serves as a *lieu de*

/bishop_perry_center_brings_hel.html; Bishop Perry Community Center website, accessed at http://bpc.arch-no.org.

[225] Stroup, "Bishop Perry Center."

mémoire, a marker that physically represents her reputation and legacy as a benefactor of education for children of African descent in New Orleans.[226]

In 1999, the Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries restored her tomb in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2. (Fig. 8) Students at Bishop Perry Middle School participated in the reconsecration ceremony held on February 27. In New Orleans' funeral fashion, the boys second lined from the school to the cemetery. It was an apt tribute to the original donor of the site for a school, reminiscent of Armand Lanusse and his students who had masses said for Couvent's soul at St. Louis Cathedral. Bishop Perry's director of development explained the school's involvement in the event: "We want this parade to be a celebration of Marie Couvent. She was a great patron of African American education." [227]

[226] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations*, No. 26 (Spring, 1989): 7.

[227] Elizabeth Donze, "Marigny School to Honor Benefactor," *Times-Picayune,* February 18, 1999.

EPILOGUE
From Madame to Madam

The old "Institution Catholique" served a very real purpose and need, and proved a tremendous influence for good, morally, religiously, and culturally in an era of dismal discrimination and neglect, and thousands of Negro children received an education, religious instruction and uplift, who otherwise would never have had a chance at all. All of this may be ascribed to the insight, dream and actual provision of Madame Bernard Couvent, one of the greatest benefactresses whom the black people of New Orleans ever had.

- Sister Mary Eugenius Gallaher, S.H.G and the eighth grade students at Holy Redeemer Elementary School, April 11, 1976

"...one of those whose name adorns a school is a woman of mixed race who bought slave girls for $1 a pound to use in her brothels."

- Larry Copeland, "La. Man Pushes to Erase Slave Owners Names from Schools," Philadelphia *Inquirer*, February 19, 1997

Although none of the institutions that operated on her property bore her name, Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent has remained within New Orleans' public memory for over 150 years after her death. How she has been remembered, however, has not been without controversy. For most of the twentieth century, Couvent was known as a "pious and benevolent" benefactress of African American education. In 1940, the city school board even agreed to name a new public school for Couvent. But in the 1990s, the leader of a campaign to rename New Orleans' public schools called Couvent's legacy into question. The name-change campaign, headed by local activist Carl Galmon, focused on schools named for slave owners in a public school system with a predominantly African American student population. Galmon argued for the removal of Couvent's name from the public school not only because she owned slaves but because, he claimed, she was a prostitute who ran a brothel. Galmon's sensationalist accusations, for which he offered no proof, challenged the long-held memory of Couvent as a patron of education.[1]

[1] Quote in Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave;" Meyer, *Names Over New Orleans Public Schools*, 46; Leslie Williams, "School named for black slave owner gets new title," *Times-Picayune*, March

This dissertation concludes with a brief examination of the twentieth-century memorialization of Marie Couvent. The varied and contested ways that Couvent has been remembered indicate her important place within the collective memory of African Americans in New Orleans and highlight instances when her memory has been used for political ends. To understand how Couvent became an early casualty of the policy to rename New Orleans' public schools, I first place the campaign in its local and national contexts. I then analyze the rhetoric utilized by Carl Galmon to discredit Couvent. Galmon's claims of Couvent's sexual deviance relied upon common stereotypes of women of color in New Orleans as eroticized objects of white male desire. By employing these discourses, Galmon contributed to the historic oppression and marginalization of black women.

Reductive interpretations of Couvent's story, like Galmon's negative portrayal, obscure the complexities of her life and attempt to erase the real experiences of free women of color in New Orleans from public memory. The entirety of Marie Couvent's life not only underlines New Orleans' central place in the Atlantic World, but exemplifies many of the challenges faced by people of African descent as they moved through slavery and freedom, and endured displacement and migration during the time of Atlantic revolutions. Couvent's experience in New Orleans illuminates ways that free and enslaved people of color negotiated strictures of race and gender in order to support themselves and make a lasting impact on the formation of New Orleans as a city. As the previous chapters have shown, Marie Couvent and her peers relied on prevailing legal systems, codes of property ownership, real estate markets, social networks, and chattel

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15, 1994, B1; Coleman Warner, "Restored tomb honors Couvent," *Times-Picayune*, February 28, 1999, B1 and B3.

slavery to control their own lives, build institutions, and protect themselves politically. Ultimately, these efforts to secure their status as free women and property owners involved complex choices.

These choices and those made in subsequent generations reveal the contradictory situations that arise within systemic structures of racism that adapt flexibly to changing political and economic conditions. As we will see, the efforts of Couvent's generation to carve opportunities for better lives within the strictures of their time placed them at odds with the ways some leaders of African descent conceived betterment in theirs, long after Emancipation and in confrontation with the overt racism manifest in contemporary Louisiana state politics. In short, erasure of the accomplishments of Couvent and others like her became a byproduct of the almost inevitable oversimplification needed to galvanize public opinion against the latest permutations of the denigration of African descendants which had remained dominant for centuries.

"An edifice worthy of this African ex-slave"[2]

In *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, Rodolphe Desdunes concluded his section on "Mme. Veuve Bernard Couvent" with the hope that the Creole of color community will continue "to appreciate the charity and foresight" of "this extraordinary woman who was the first to improve the plight of the orphans of color." Desdunes called for a monument to be erected in Couvent's honor so that future generations would not criticize the present generation, as Desdunes reproached his predecessors, for not properly commemorating the Catholic Institution's benefactress.[3] Almost three decades later, Desdunes' recommendation for a public memorial to Madame Couvent was realized when the

[2] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-Slave."
[3] Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 144-145, 147.

Orleans Parish School Board opened a brand new school for African American students in 1940, and named it Marie C. Couvent Elementary School. The newly-constructed public school was located at 2021 Pauger Street, six blocks from the St. Louis School that operated on Couvent's Faubourg Marigny property.[4] This perhaps was not the monument that Desdunes envisioned in 1911, but it fittingly honored Couvent's legacy as a patron of education for children of African descent in New Orleans.

A committee of local African American leaders, which included civil rights lawyer A. P. Tureaud, chose the name "Marie C. Couvent" for the school on Pauger Street.[5] The idea may have originated with Marcus B. Christian who published a piece on "Madame Gabriel Bernard Couvent" in the *Louisiana Weekly* in 1938. An editorial note above Christian's article explained that it was one of "a series of biographical sketches of outstanding Negroes in Louisiana history" written in response to a recent school board policy that allowed the all-black schools in the city's segregated system to be named for African Americans.[6] At the time, Christian directed a team of researchers who compiled a history of African Americans in Louisiana for the Federal Writers' Project. His biography of Couvent likely came out of this larger endeavor.[7] Christian ended the article by urging the Orleans Parish School Board to choose Marie Couvent as a "worthy Negro" for

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[4] Meyer, *Names Over New Orleans Public Schools*, 46; Lucille Levy Hutton Papers, Box 22, Folders 1 and 2, ARC. The "C" in "Marie C. Couvent" stood for "Cirnaire," which was how the notary spelled "Sirnir" in Couvent's 1832 will.

[5] Warner, "Restored tomb honors Couvent."

[6] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-slave." Christian authored several of these "biographical sketches."

[7] Marilyn Hessler, "Marcus Christian: The Man and his Collection," *Louisiana History*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Winter, 1987): 41-42; Jerah Johnson, "Marcus B. Christian and the WPA History of Black People in Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter, 1979): 113. Christian used the research to write "A Black History of Louisiana," which he unfortunately never completed. The manuscript, along with numerous notes and primary sources are archived at the University of New Orleans. Christian devoted one chapter in the manuscript to "Negro Education." See Series XIII, Box 5a, Marcus B. Christian Collection, University of New Orleans, NOLA, hereafter, UNO. Christian's notes on Marie Couvent can be found in Series XI, Box 11, Marcus B. Christian Collection, UNO.

whom an African American school should be named. He wrote, "To one with a sense of justice, it seems that the State of Louisiana, for the debt it owes to the millions of Negroes it kept in bondage for one hundred and fifty years, could do no finer thing than to rear up an edifice worthy of this African ex-slave who gave her all to the education and well-being of free colored children."[8]

Fifty-four years after the new elementary school opened, amid a campaign to eliminate the names of slaveholders from New Orleans' public schools, the school board agreed to remove the name "Marie C. Couvent" from the building on Pauger Street.[9] Following a new school board policy concerning school name changes, two-thirds of the elementary school's faculty and parents voted to rename the school "A. P. Tureaud" to honor his successful efforts in the struggle to end segregation in New Orleans public schools. When asked why the school chose to change its name the principal of Marie C. Couvent stated simply: "She was a slave owner."[10]

Confederate Generals, Founding Fathers, and Neo-Nazi Politicians

The impetus for the School Board's naming policy came from the persistent lobbying of two local organizations, the Afro American Liberation League (AALL) and the Louisiana State Committee Against Apartheid (LSCAA). In 1989 the associations first requested that the Orleans Parish School Board rename all of the schools named for slave owners or traders.[11] Carl Galmon, founder and president of the LSCAA, was an

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[8] Christian, "Dream of an African Ex-slave."

[9] Williams, "School named for black slave owner gets new title."

[10] Williams, "School named for black slave owner gets new title." A total of 267 of 399 parents, teachers, and administrators voted for the change.

[11] Rhonda Nabonne, "Group: Free Schools from Slavery Stigma," *Times-Picayune*, June 5, 1990, A1; Rhonda Nabonne, "School Renamed to Lose Reminders of Slavery," *Times-Picayune*, July 1, 1995, B3.

outspoken proponent of changing the schools' names. He counted forty-nine out of 121 schools named for people who held slaves. Galmon argued that this was problematic. After decades of "white flight" to the suburbs triggered initially by school integration, African Americans made up ninety percent of the total student population in New Orleans' public schools by the early 1990s.[12] Galmon explained that it was "a total insult to have our students...singing songs and honouring [sic] people who enslaved our ancestors."[13] By 1992 Galmon and his supporters had successfully convinced the school board to adopt a policy that removed the names of "former slave owners and others who did not respect equal opportunity for all," if an individual school's administrators, parents, and students passed a resolution to do so.[14]

Within five years, twenty-two public schools changed names under the new policy. Some of the targeted appellations not only designated slave owners, but Confederate generals and government officials such as Robert E. Lee, Judah P. Benjamin, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Jefferson Davis. Other name changes included John McDonogh, a very wealthy slaveholder from New Orleans who left half of his estate to be used for public education for children of all races.[15] The new names reflected the schools' student

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[12] Kevin Sack, "Blacks Strip Slaveholders' Names Off Schools," *New York Times*, November 12, 1997, A1; "Washington Vanishes," *The Economist*, vol. 344, no. 8044 (November 22, 1997), 31; Chris Adams, "Our Separate Ways- Integration Enrolled in Name Only," *Times-Picayune*, November 14, 1993, A1; Logsdon and Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 266. Logsdon and Devore report that New Orleans' public schools were eighty-five percent African American as early as 1980. The movement of white families out of New Orleans had a similar effect on the city's overall population. In 1990, sixty-two percent of New Orleans' residents were people of African descent. See Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 60.

[13] Quoted in "Washington Vanishes."

[14] Leslie Williams, "School Board May Tackle Issue of School Names," *Times- Picayune*, November 27, 1992, B1; Leslie Williams, "New Policy Allows Schools to Be Renamed," *Times-Picayune*, January 22, 1993, B1; Lynne Jensen, "School names reflect new era; Washington put on casualty list," *Times-Picayune*, October 24, 1997, A1. According to the policy, secondary school students have a vote. Only the parents, teachers, and administration vote for elementary school name changes.

[15] Williams, "School named for black slave owner gets new title;" Gill, "Proper naming of public schools," *Times-Picayune*, April 3, 1994, B7; "Washington Vanishes." In his will, McDonogh instructed that his estate to be divided between Louisiana and Maryland and that the money be used to build schools

population, honoring African American activists and artists like former Mayor Ernest Morial and singer Mahalia Jackson.[16]

New Orleans' school name-change campaign fit within a broader movement by African Americans across the nation, and particularly in the South, to both assert and include their own interpretations of historical figures and events in the commemorative landscape.[17] Geographers Derek Alderman and Owen Dwyer define commemorative landscapes as the various types of "material sites of memory," including plaques, statues, street signs, and parks and "the cultural practices and relations that surround them."[18] In the South, the memorialization of the Confederacy had long dominated the region's commemorative landscape. Hence, names like Davis and Lee were given to New Orleans schools originally designated as "white-only." Whites controlled and defined the public memory of the South throughout the century after the Civil War, largely ignoring, if not outright denying African American contributions to and experiences of the past.[19]

Gaining access to political power following the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s enabled African Americans to openly challenge the prevailing "white social

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"wherein the poor...of both sexes and all classes and castes of color, shall have admittance, free of expense." Not until Reconstruction did New Orleans administrators use the McDonogh fund for the benefit of black children. At least five McDonogh schools (Nos. 36, 31, 38, 19, and 40) have been renamed. See Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 33-35; Meyer, *Names Over New Orleans Public School*, 144-146; "Changes in the Names of New Orleans Public Schools," Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, accessed November 13, 2014, http:// www.nutrias.org /facts /nopsnames.htm.

[16] Robert E. Lee became Dr. Ronald McNair; Judah P. Benjamin became Mary McLeod Bethune; P.G.T. Beauregard became Thurgood Marshall; Jefferson Davis became Ernest Morial; and McDonogh No. 36 became Mahalia Jackson. See the full list of school name changes on the New Orleans Public Library website, http:// www.nutrias.org/facts/nopsnames.htm.

[17] Derek Alderman, "Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds., Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 68.

[18] Derek Alderman and Owen Dwyer, "A Primer on the Geography of Memory: The Site and Situation of Commemorative Landscapes," online essay in "Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina," Documenting the American South, (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), accessed November 25, 2014 at http://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/features/essays/alderman_two/

[19] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "No Deed but Memory," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed., W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 10-11.

memory" that "was both public and universal in its claims."[20] African American groups, most often on the local level, sought to rectify the exclusion of black people and experiences from the national historical narrative through the addition, removal, or replacement of specific material sites of memory. The naming of streets for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., serves as one prominent example of the movement to honor black historical figures in a commemorative landscape littered with white male heroes.[21] The call to replace the names of slave owners on New Orleans schools with African American luminaries of the past served a similar function. These acts of commemorative re/naming expressed pride in African American achievements and declared the legitimate value of black historical figures to New Orleans' community at large.[22]

As Derek Alderman points out, however, efforts to commemorate Martin Luther King rarely go uncontested. He writes, "In naming streets for King, people actively interpret his legacy and reputation and, in many instances, debate the social connotations and meaning of memorializing him."[23] Yet, the social connotation of memorializing Confederate leaders and antebellum slave owners for a predominantly African American student population caused little debate in New Orleans. Not everyone agreed with the policy, of course. Some white residents considered the name changes unfair and unnecessary. A few residents of African descent expressed reservations about the policy's efficacy, arguing that the effort to rename the schools could have been better spent on

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[20] Brundage, "No Deed but Memory,"10-11.

[21] Derek Alderman, "Street Names as Commemorative Landscapes: The Case of Martin Luther King, Jr.," online essay in "Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina," Documenting the American South, (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), accessed November 25, 2014 at http://docsouth.unc.edu /commland/features/essays/alderman_one/.

[22] Alderman and Dwyer, "A Primer on the Geography of Memory."

[23] Alderman, "Street Names as Memorial Arenas," 71.

improving them.[24] The overall reaction to the name-changes, however, garnered much less opposition than a concurrent and bitter public dispute over the Liberty Place Monument, originally erected to honor white vigilante violence during Reconstruction.[25]

While the school name changes met with little resistance in New Orleans, the policy sparked a national controversy when the school board agreed to remove George Washington's name from an elementary school in 1997. Across the country, critics of the change felt that Washington's distinction as the first president of the United States should exempt him from censure.[26] Galmon, however, disagreed that Washington's status as a Founding Father outweighed his slave ownership. "To African-Americans," Galmon told the *New York Times*, "George Washington has as much meaning as David Duke."[27]

Galmon's reference to Ku Klux Klan leader and neo-Nazi David Duke highlights the specific local context in which the school-name change campaign occurred. In 1989,

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[24] Lynda Moreau, "Children of the Times," *Times-Picayune*, June 17, 1990, B10; Mary Lou Widmer, "John McDonogh, Humanitarian," *Times-Picayune*, December 4, 1992, B6; John Redfield, "Blacks Owned Slaves Too," *Times-Picayune*, December 16, 1992, B6; Esbii Ogholoh, "Focus on the Tough Problems Facing Our Schools," *Times-Picayune*, December 26, 1992; Toni W. Jones, "Name Change Not a Top Concern," *Times-Picayune*, January 9, 1993, B6; Hiram H. Cooke, "Revisiting Slavery Doesn't Improve Education," *Times-Picayune*, November 24, 1997, B4.

[25] Erected in 1891, the Liberty Place Monument commemorated a violent altercation between a group of elite white Democrats intent on returning "white supremacy" to state governance and the racially integrated Metropolitan Police Force in 1874. In the twentieth century, segregationist politicians and later David Duke held rallies at the monument. African American activists like Galmon and City Council member Dorothy Mae Taylor, who sponsored an ordinance to have the monument permanently removed, viewed the obelisk as a symbol of racism. Heated debates over the meaning of the monument and whether or not it should remain took place throughout 1993. For more on the history of the Liberty Place Monument see Lawrence Powell, "Reinventing Tradition: Liberty Place, Historical Memory, and Silk-Stocking Vigilantism in New Orleans Politics," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 20, no.1 (1999), 127-149. For articles on the public controversy over the monument see for example, Kevin Bell, "Council's Monument Debate Turns Ugly," *Times-Picayune*, March 19, 1993, B1; Susan Finch, "Duke Condemns 'Nazi-Like' Moves Over Monument," *Times-Picayune*, June 16, 1993, B1; Littice Bacon-Blood, "The Liberty Monument," *Times-Picayune*, January 29, 2012; Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 259-278.

[26] Quote in "Washington Vanishes," 31; Lynne Jensen, "Name Change Draws Media- Decision Causes Only Ripple Here," *Times-Picayune*, November 22, 1997, B1; Sack, "Blacks Strip Slaveholders' Names Off Schools;" Kevin Sack, "Today's Battles Topple Yesterday's Heroes," *New York Times*, November 16, 1997; "Bye, George!" *People Weekly* 48, no. 22 (1997): 192. George Washington Elementary was renamed for Dr. Charles Drew, a surgeon who made advances in blood transfusion research and protested the segregation of blood by race within the US military during World War II.

[27] Sack, "Blacks Strip Slaveholders' Names off Schools."

a predominantly white, middle-class suburb of New Orleans elected Duke as a Republican to the state House of Representatives. Two years later Duke won the Republican primary to run for Governor. He eventually lost the election by a wide margin, but only after an intense runoff campaign that saw the mass mobilization of African American voters, Holocaust survivors, and the business community. The telling returns showed Duke received fifty-five percent of the white vote.[28]

David Duke's rapid rise to power in Louisiana reflected the national political climate. Duke represented an extreme case of the white, neo-conservative backlash against affirmative action and other measures put in place to remedy systemic racial inequality in areas like education, employment, and housing. So-called "color-blind" policies of the Reagan and Bush presidencies diminished many of the gains made by civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s.[29] With his Republican makeover, Duke opposed affirmative action, "welfare cheats," and "big government," prompting one reporter to write that Duke "has a white backlash by the tail, and he's swinging it for all it's worth."[30] While Galmon's comparison of George Washington and David Duke illustrated his common resort to sweeping generalizations and hyperbole, the threat that Duke posed to African Americans and other minority groups was real. In the face of such threats,

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[28] Lawrence Powell, *Troubled Memory: Anne Levy, the Holocaust, and David Duke's Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-7, 471, 474-474, 480-487, 498; James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 5-6; Jack Wardlaw, "It's Edwards - Heavy Voter Turnout Buries Duke - Fourth Term Is A Record," *Times-Picayune*, November 17, 1991, A1.

[29] Michael Omi and Harold Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117-118, 130-135; George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3, (Sept., 1995): 377-378.

[30] Powell, *Troubled Memory*, 5; Wardlaw, "It's Edwards;" James Welsh, "Riding White Backlash by the Tail," *Times-Picayune*, December 17, 1989, B11.

symbolic actions like changing the name of a school and other struggles to define public memory in New Orleans took on added weight.

The Curious Case of Marie C. Couvent

Marie C. Couvent was the third name to be removed from a New Orleans public school after Jefferson Davis and John McDonogh. As the only woman and the only black person on the list of school names changed, Couvent's case stood apart from the other white male slave owners, Confederate generals, and Reconstruction-era politicians. National media coverage of the renaming campaign suggested that Confederate generals, as racist symbols, were understandably removed. Washington, on the other hand, was considered "an unlikely target," given his eminence as a sacred national icon. Couvent, however, presented a curious case, in part, because she was a woman but mostly because she was black slave owner.[31] For defenders of the name changes, removing Marie C. Couvent's name from the school lent the new policy an air of fairness. Proponents could claim an equal-opportunity erasure based solely on slaveholding. But as more than one newspaper article pointed out, the name change obscured the complicated history of free people of color in New Orleans in favor of "simplistic" politics.[32]

The school-name change policy explicitly targeted individuals who owned slaves, and the evidence for Couvent having done so is ample. My research revealed that over the course of three decades, Couvent owned three times as many enslaved people as the number known in 1994. The evidence clearly indicates that she owned slaves for

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[31] Quote in "Washington Vanishes;" Sack, "Blacks Strio Slaveholders' Names off Schools;" Gill, "Proper Naming of Public Schools."

[32] Quote in Brent Staples, "Wrestling with the Ghosts of New Orleans," *New York Times*, February 9, 1998, A18; Warner, "Restored Tomb Honors Couvent."

economic reasons, profiting from their labor and through their sale. Yet, the evidence also demonstrates more complex motivations at work. Couvent formed familial ties with a few of the people she held in bondage. She married the enslaved Bernard, and the marriage record and subsequent notary records indicate that both husband and wife considered Bernard to be a free man. She freed and baptized all of Seraphine's children, and eventually emancipated Seraphine, as well. That these relationships were important to Couvent is demonstrated by her two wills, in which she provides first for Seraphine and then for Seraphine's children after her death. Thus, slavery allowed Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent to build both wealth and a social support system in New Orleans in ways that made sense to her through her own experiences as an African and as an enslaved woman in Saint-Domingue.

This more nuanced understanding of Couvent's slaveholding does not make light of the fact that she owned fellow human beings nor excuses her for doing so. It does, however, open a window onto a world very different from our own and offers a glimpse of the complexity of relationships that developed within the system of slavery but also because of it. It is undeniable that Couvent profited personally in both economic and social terms through the exploitation of other black people, mostly women. We can condemn her for that and then write her off, as Galmon and his followers did. Or we can attempt to understand her slave ownership within the context of "the system of racial and gendered domination within which she lived."[33] Hierarchies of race, gender, and status circumscribed Couvent's existence in New Orleans as a formerly enslaved African woman. This does not render her decision to own slaves less troubling, but it does

[33] Marisa Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive," in *Historicising Gender and Sexuality*, eds., Kevin Murphy and Jennifer Spear (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 54.

recover a black woman's life and in the process, albeit opaquely, the lives of the men, women, and children she owned.[34]

And yet, if the point of the name-change campaign was to remove the names of slave owners from New Orleans public schools, then Marie C. Couvent Elementary presented a straightforward case. Despite this easy equation of slaveholding and school renaming, Carl Galmon argued that owning slaves was only part of the reason why Marie Couvent did not deserve a school named in her honor. Throughout the campaign, Galmon publicly decried Couvent as a Haitian prostitute and madam whose brothel of light-skinned women pandered to a wealthy, white clientele. Galmon's allegations included references to Couvent procuring women for "quadroon balls" as well as purchasing "children to provide concubines for Uptown white men."[35]

Galmon offered little proof for his claims. When asked how he learned about Couvent's alleged brothel owning, he suggested that this was something "everyone knew"—a story that circulated among African Americans in New Orleans.[36] Although the importance of oral history should not be discounted, it is difficult to reconcile Galmon's depiction of Couvent as a "hooker from Haiti" and her long-standing image as a pious philanthropist.[37] New Orleanians of African descent developed the image of Couvent as a benefactress and maintained it for over a century and a half after her death. The source of Couvent's image contrasts to that of other well-known free women of color who lived in antebellum New Orleans. Marie Laveau would be the primary example. In

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[34] My thoughts on ways of understanding Couvent's slave owning have been influenced by Marisa Fuentes' essay, cited above, on the "troubled archive" of Rachael Pringle Polgreen, a formerly enslaved woman who owned slaves and likely ran a brothel in eighteenth-century Barbados.

[35] Warner, "Restored Tomb Honors Couvent."

[36] Warner, "Restored Tomb Honors Couvent."

[37] Quote in Gill, "Proper Naming of Public Schools."

Laveau's case, white male writers played a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of representations of the so-called "Voodoo Queen," including claims that she acted as a procuress of mixed-race women for the sexual purposes of white men.[38] Moreover, the vehemence with which Galmon attacked Couvent's character cast doubt on his claims as did his unwillingness to offer additional evidence that would have bolstered his allegations. Instead, when confronted with his lack of proof of Couvent owning a brothel or working as a prostitute, Galmon retorted, "Where is the evidence it did not happen?"[39]

The issue of evidence (or lack thereof) aside, it must be conceded that Galmon's accusations against Marie Couvent are not beyond the realm of possibility. Prostitution in antebellum New Orleans was widespread, and free women of color participated in the sex trade as both prostitutes and brothel owners. In her study of New Orleans' court records and newspaper accounts of commercialized sex, Judith Schafer found numerous examples of free women of color who managed brothels, "some staffed with other free women of color, others with white women, and still others with women of both races."[40] A similar mix of racial demographics among prostitutes could be found in brothels run by white women. Yet, women of African descent employed in assignation houses were not always free. The court records and newspapers indicated numerous examples of slave owners, including free women of color, forcing enslaved women to work as prostitutes. Some enslaved women worked as madams, as well. Schafer also discovered multiple

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[38] Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, xxx, 134-136.
[39] Quoted in Warner, "Restored Tomb Honors Couvent."
[40] Judith Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 41-42.

cases that involved girls and young women as prostitutes or victims of sexual abuse.[41] Given this context, Couvent conceivably could have been involved in New Orleans' sex trade. My research, however, has not found evidence that supports this claim.

"The story line is straight out of antebellum New Orleans" [42]

I am less interested in debating whether or not Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent owned a brothel than I am in analyzing the rhetoric used by Galmon to disparage a woman who died well over a century ago. Galmon's accusations simultaneously sexualized Couvent and attacked her based on presumptions about her sexuality. In doing so, he enlisted an all-too-common trope by which African American women historically have been and continue to be exploited and dismissed. Galmon's allegations relied on a discourse of black female hypersexuality, a "controlling image of Black womanhood" that white people utilized to justify black women's enslavement and sexual abuse.[43] More specifically, however, Galmon evoked a pervasive popular perception of New Orleans linking the commodification of mixed-race women, real and imagined, to the "deviant" sexualities of prostitution and sex across the color line.

In his attempt to discredit Couvent by calling her a prostitute and madam, Galmon drew upon long-held stereotypes about free women of color and their sexuality.

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[41] Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 3, 7-8, 11, 40-48, 56, 59, 156-157. Schafer utilized the Recorder's Court and First District Court records, which only cover the period between 1846 and 1862, and the local newspapers for the corresponding years. That the sex trade in New Orleans followed similar patterns in the decades prior to 1846 (and when Couvent was alive) cannot be said for certain. Certainly the demographics among prostitutes would have changed. During the period Schafer studied, Irish women made up the majority of prostitutes. This would have not been the case prior to the 1840s when large numbers of Irish immigrants began to arrive in New Orleans.

[42] Staples, "Wrestling with the Ghosts of New Orleans."

[43] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 28- 30, 38; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69, quote on 72, 81-84. Collins demonstrates how this stereotype continues in modified forms today.

According to these common portrayals, free women of color were beautiful, light-skinned seductresses of white men. In Saint-Domingue, as I discussed in Chapter Two, these women were "*mulatresses*"—lascivious and frivolous, and, according to white colonists like Moreau de Saint-Méry, dangerous to the French colonial project.[44] In early nineteenth-century New Orleans, these women were known as "quadroons." They, too, sought relationships with white men in exchange for economic security. According to travel writers, anti-slavery literature, and popular fiction, New Orleans quadroons were legendary mixed-race beauties, "who from their infancy are trained in the arts of love."[45] Free black mothers raised their daughters to form attachments with wealthy, white men in "a system of concubinage that has been without a parallel even in Oriental countries."[46]

In the oft-repeated narrative, such relationships were "virtually institutionalized" by so-called *plaçage* arrangements. A free woman of color became a *placée* when she was "placed" with a well-to-do white man through a formal agreement between her mother and the suitor. The mother would arrange for the man to provide his mistress with a house and financial support for her and the children they had together. Dances held exclusively for mixed-race free women of color and white men, called quadroon balls, served as the site where such *plaçage* arrangements were made. The relationships were said to be temporary, usually ending when the man married a white woman.[47]

Until quite recently, historians have accepted this narrative as fact. New scholarship by Emily Clark and Kenneth Aslakson, however, questions the veracity of

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[44] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 48-50.
[45] Quoted in Clark, *American Quadroon*, 150.
[46] Quoted in Clark, *American Quadroon*, 148.
[47] Quote in Alecia Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 10; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 148-149; Kenneth Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2012): 709, 711-712.

plaçage. These scholars demonstrate that while relationships between free women of color and white men existed in nineteenth-century New Orleans, the historical reality of such relationships does not conform to the romanticized account put forth by contemporary travel writers. Neither scholar found evidence of contracted arrangements between white men and free women of color in their extensive research of archival sources, nor did they find "good evidence for the use of the term *plaçage* by antebellum New Orleanians."[48] Instead, they each traced the discursive genealogy of what Clark terms "the *plaçage* complex" and Aslakson calls the "quadroon-*plaçage* myth" through the travel literature and other nineteenth-century texts that produced it. Careful scrutiny of these commonly cited sources reveals them to be unreliable, with few writers having actually witnessed this phenomenon and most recycling information from previously written accounts.[49]

Quadroon balls also existed in antebellum New Orleans, but they were not exclusive, genteel affairs in which young free women of color were presented to society in order to find a white mate. Rather, quadroon balls were one of many forms of nightly entertainment offered in the city.[50] Although travel narratives portrayed these balls as a "French" New Orleans tradition, they were actually "a Haitian import adapted to exploit the boom-town, male-dominated market of New Orleans, perhaps promoted in the 1820s to advance the material prospects of refugee-descended women." Within a decade, quadroon balls had become cheap tourist attractions, where white male visitors to the city

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[48] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 59, 97-98, 100-103, 126-129, quote on 148, 154-160, 166, 180, 191, 193, 195; Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 710, 714-715, 717-719, 722, 726.

[49] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 52, 69-70, 132-161, 170; Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 709-715, 727.

[50] Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 721; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 174.

could experience "a piece of the mythic *plaçage* complex." By the 1850s, quadroon balls operated as low-rent spectacles and sites for prostitutes to solicit customers.[51]

Clark and Aslakson agree that the influx of free women of color from Saint-Domingue in New Orleans during the first decade of the nineteenth century inspired the popular association between mixed-race women, quadroon balls, and the myth of *plaçage* with the Crescent City.[52] Clark explains that texts published both before and in the wake of the Haitian Revolution predisposed white Americans to view free women of color as temptresses of white men. She argues that the difficulties faced by numerous free women of color refugees in rebuilding their lives in New Orleans often led to "survival strategies that recapitulated the stereotype's features" and "reinforced its mythology."[53] Subsequent writers transformed the Saint-Domingue *mûlatresse* into the New Orleans quadroon. Clark contends that this makeover nullified the perceived dangers of the mixed-race seductress to white society, and by extension, the threat to slavery posed by the Haitian Revolution. The quadroon formed a docile figure, easily and willingly controlled by white men, and New Orleans became her native home.[54]

Clark's work shows not only how the lived experiences of free women of color in New Orleans did not match that of the quadroon of literary fame, but also that the pervasiveness of this mythologized figure had real consequences for women of African descent. The popularity of the quadroon image created expectations about free women of color for white male visitors to antebellum New Orleans. Such sexual fantasies

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[51] Clark, *American Quadroon*, quotes on 172, 174, 177-178, 180. August Tessier, a white Saint-Domingue refugee, first introduced the quadroon ball concept to New Orleans in 1805. See Clark, 66-69 and Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 719-720.

[52] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 6, 38, 70, 149, 154-155, 158; Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 716, 722.

[53] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 48-50, 54, 59, 62, quote on 63.

[54] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 6, 9, 38-39, 69-70, 132-133, 146.

encouraged a market for entertainment spaces like quadroon balls and employment for free women of color as "housekeeper companions."[55] The quadroon myth also promoted the sex trade with free black prostitutes as well as the "fancy trade" in enslaved women of mixed-race sold expressly as sexual partners for white male buyers.[56] Light-skinned women and girls advertised as "fancy maids" embodied the sexual desires of white men and the long history of rape that was a central tool of white domination of black women.[57]Abolitionist literature pointed to the fancy trade as the epitome of the degradations of slavery, fictionalizing the plight of real mixed-race women sold in New Orleans as sex slaves through the trope of the "tragic octoroon."[58] Together, the figures of the New Orleans quadroon and her enslaved counterpart, the almost-white (and therefore, tragic) octoroon created a powerful discourse about women of color in the city. Whether *placées* or enslaved fancy maids, mixed-race women were highly-prized sexual objects that could be purchased by white men for a price in antebellum New Orleans.[59]

The conflation of New Orleans with mixed-race women and sexual excess (as well as access) continued to inform the nation's popular perception of the city after the Civil War.

No longer able to profit from slavery, New Orleans promoted its reputation for decadence and libertinism to boost its economy through tourism in the postbellum period. The city's status as a hotbed for prostitution and sex across the color line became an important

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[55] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 133, 148-149, 152, 161, 164, quote on 170, 174.

[56] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 164, 170-171, 180.

[57] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 133, 155; Edward Baptist, " 'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maid,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 5 (Dec., 2001): 1647.

[58] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 133-134, 147-148, 164; Emily Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 50-51, 56.

[59] Clark, *American Quadroon*, 164; Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 50, 66.

marketing tool at the turn of the twentieth-century, following the creation of the infamous red-light district, Storyville, in 1897.[60] As Emily Landau explains, in Storyville "brothels specializing in octoroon women repackaged and commodified the longstanding image of the light-skinned black woman not as a slave, but *literally* as a prostitute."[61] Successful "octoroon" madams like Lulu White and Willie Piazza deployed the figures of the antebellum quadroon mistress and fancy maid to market light-skinned women to a white elite clientele in their high-class brothels. Landau argues that while these women defied racial segregation, the selling of sex with "octoroon" prostitutes exclusively to white men upheld white male sexual power and ultimately functioned alongside Jim Crow laws and lynchings as a means to reestablish the antebellum racial order in the absence of slavery.[62]

Long after the demise of Storyville, New Orleans continues to capitalize on its reputation as an exotic, sexually permissive, and hedonistic city. The quadroon myth serves as a key device in touting New Orleans' exceptional and romantic past to the tourist trade—now the mainstay of the city's economy. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, numerous publications, including popular and academic histories, fiction, film, and travel brochures perpetuated the common narrative of the New Orleans quadroon.[63] With each retelling, the myth further assumes the appearance of truth. Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising that Carl Galmon relied on this enduring discourse to bolster is claim that Marie Couvent was both a prostitute and a madam.

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[60] Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 1, 3, 37-38; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 181; Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 2, 13-14.

[61] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 65.

[62] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 1, 9, 14, 27, 132-133.

[63] Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 229-230; Clark, *American Quadroon*, 190-194; Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth," 725-726.

When Galmon made references to light-skinned women, quadroon balls, and wealthy white men in his accusations against Couvent he knowingly played upon "well-worn grooves of association" linking mixed-race women, prostitution, and interracial sex in the popular imagination of New Orleans.[64] The pervasiveness of this stereotype can be seen in national media accounts of the name-change campaign.[65] In a story on Galmon's quest to rename the schools, for example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* referred to Couvent as "a woman of mixed race who bought slave girls for $1 a pound to use in her brothels." Overlooking the absurdity of this statement, the reporter found it to be a "bizarre twist" that a school was named for such a woman in the first place.[66] That a Philadelphia journalist would accept at face value such a salacious description of Marie Couvent speaks to the enduring power of the quadroon myth on a national level. Furthermore, the *Inquirer*'s coverage illustrates the ease with which Galmon managed to discredit Couvent using discourses of race and sexuality.

Over the twentieth century, the memory of Marie Couvent shifted from Madame to madam, from a pious philanthropist to a prostitute and brothel owner, from someone worthy of having a school named after her to someone who deserved to be forgotten. Descriptions of Couvent have oscillated between a dichotomy of female archetypes—the Madonna and the whore. But neither Desdunes' pious, noble woman nor Galmon's hooker from Haiti allows for the real-life decisions Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent faced.

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[64] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed., Gunzenlin Schmid Noerr, trans., Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 109.

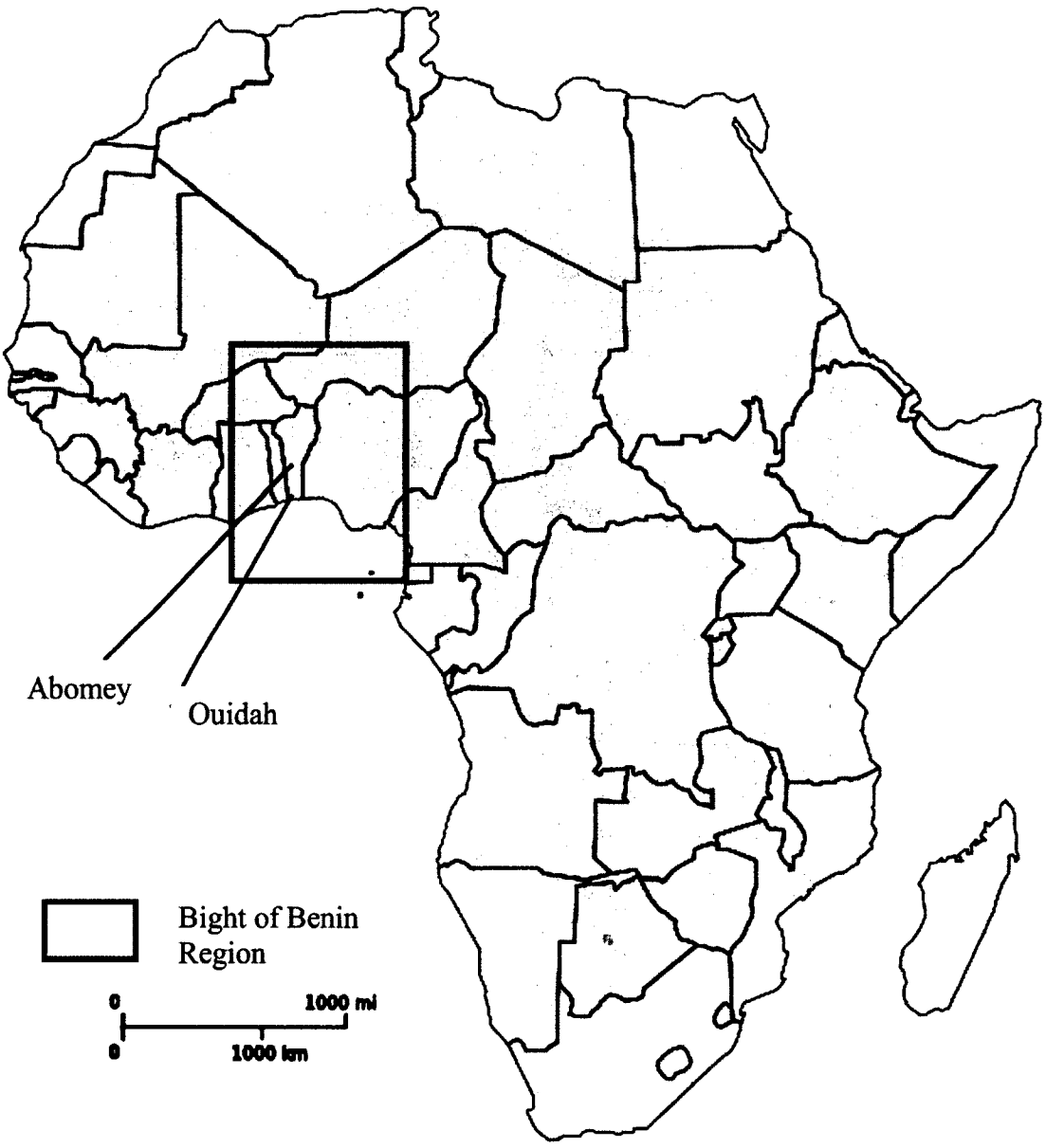
[65] In an editorial, journalist Brent Staples described the name-change policy as "a story line... straight out of antebellum New Orleans," where race relations were complicated "by institutionalizing relationships between white slave masters and free mulatto women who often rated lavish, separate households and explicit agreements of support." See Staples, "Wrestling with the Ghosts of New Orleans."

[66] Larry Copeland, "La. Man Pushes to Erase Slave Owners' Names from Schools," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 19, 1997, accessed November 18, 2014, http://articles.philly.com/1997-02-19/news/25535625_1_georgia-flag-mcdonogh-schools.

Her experiences and the contexts in which she lived were much more complex than these characterizations could ever convey. Both extremes elide key aspects of her biography that I argue are critical to understanding her life. Couvent was African-born and enslaved as a child. She survived the middle passage, decades of enslavement in one of the harshest slave systems in the Caribbean, and a violent revolution. Couvent was a mother, and like so many enslaved women who had children, she endured the loss of her son. A middle-aged woman when she arrived in New Orleans, Couvent rebuilt her life there. She not only lived for another thirty years but thrived in the rapidly developing city. Couvent married, created a familial and social network, and participated in building a community among free people of color in her new home. Through her bequest of a school, she supported future generations of that community. Couvent owned land, material goods, and, yes, enslaved men, women, and children. This cannot be ignored nor should it. Ultimately, erasing her name from the school does just that. Not only do we lose sight of her life, by extension we lose the long, rich history of the "Couvent School" and its significant role in the unfinished struggle for racial equality in New Orleans.

APPENDIX

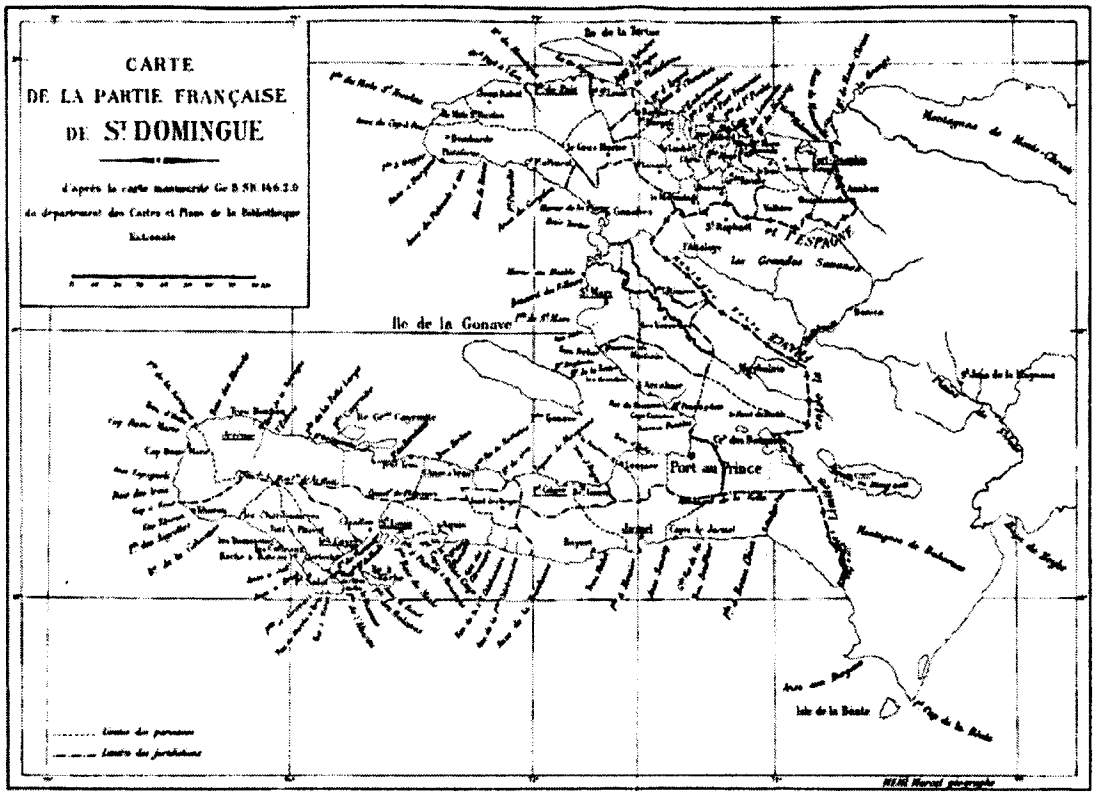
Figure 1: The Bight of Benin Region



Map of Africa by Andreas 06 with modifications made by the author

Accessed at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blank_Map-Africa.svg

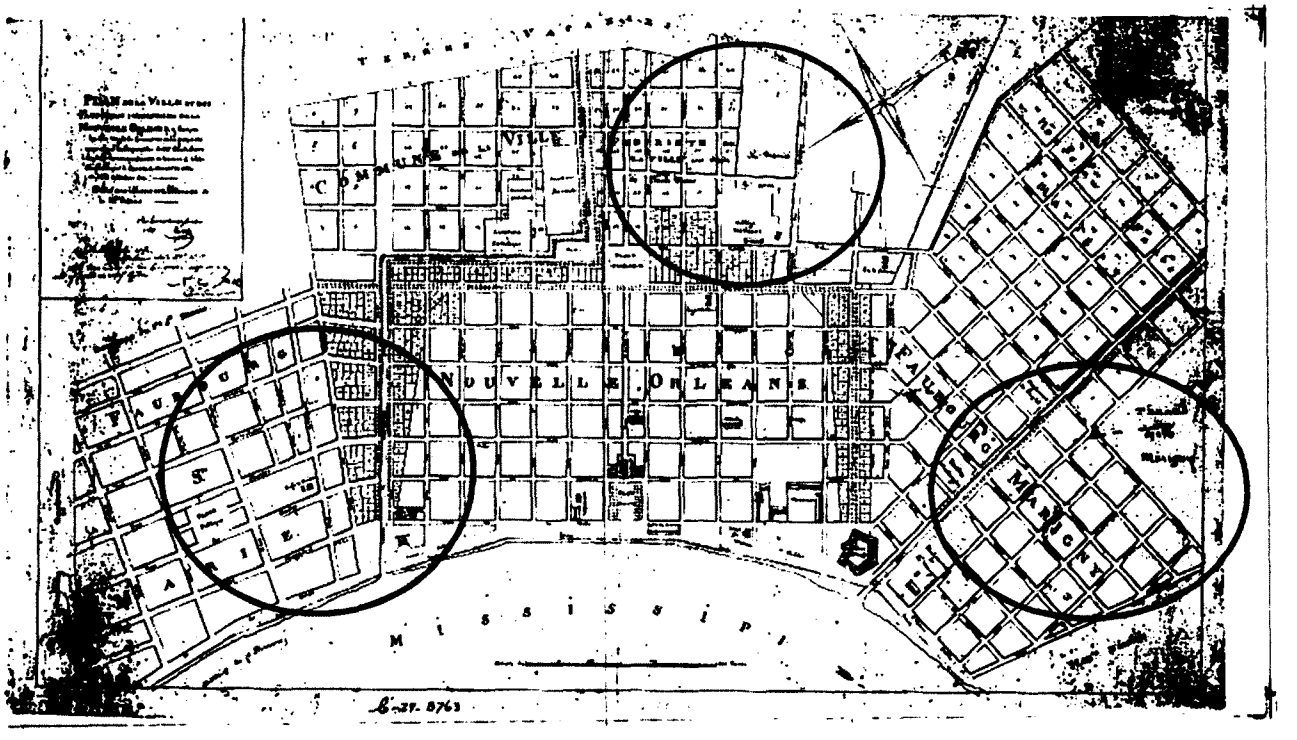
Figure 2: Saint-Domingue



Carte de la partie française de St. Domingue d'après la carte manuscrite Ge B SH.146.2.9 du département des Cartes et Plans de la Bibliothèque Nationale by Marcel Mehl, showing the 1777 boundaries within the French Colony

Accessed at http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=File:Partie_francaise_saint_domi.gif

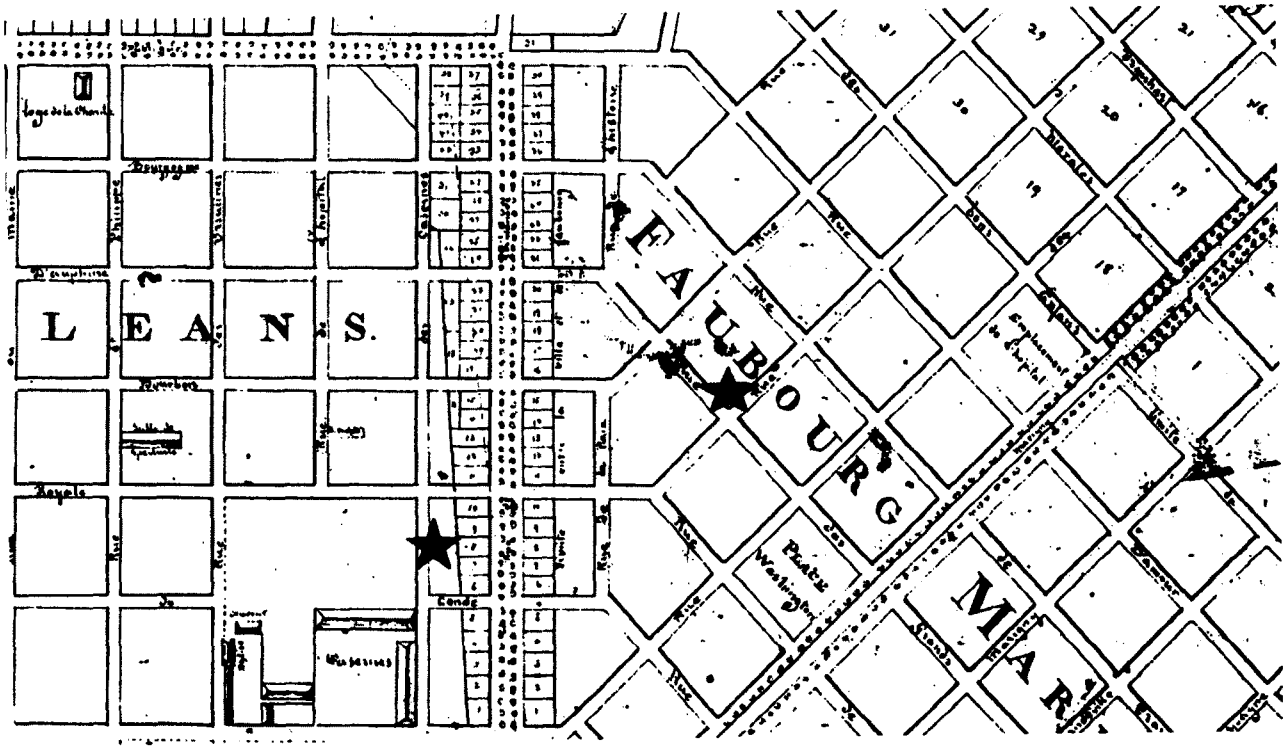
Figure 3: Development of the Creole Faubourgs



Blue: Faubourg Ste. Marie/St. Mary Red: Faubourg Tremé Green: Faubourg Marigny

Map from Copy of Plan of New Orleans, June 20, 1812 by Jacques Tanesse
New Orleans Notarial Archives with modifications by the author

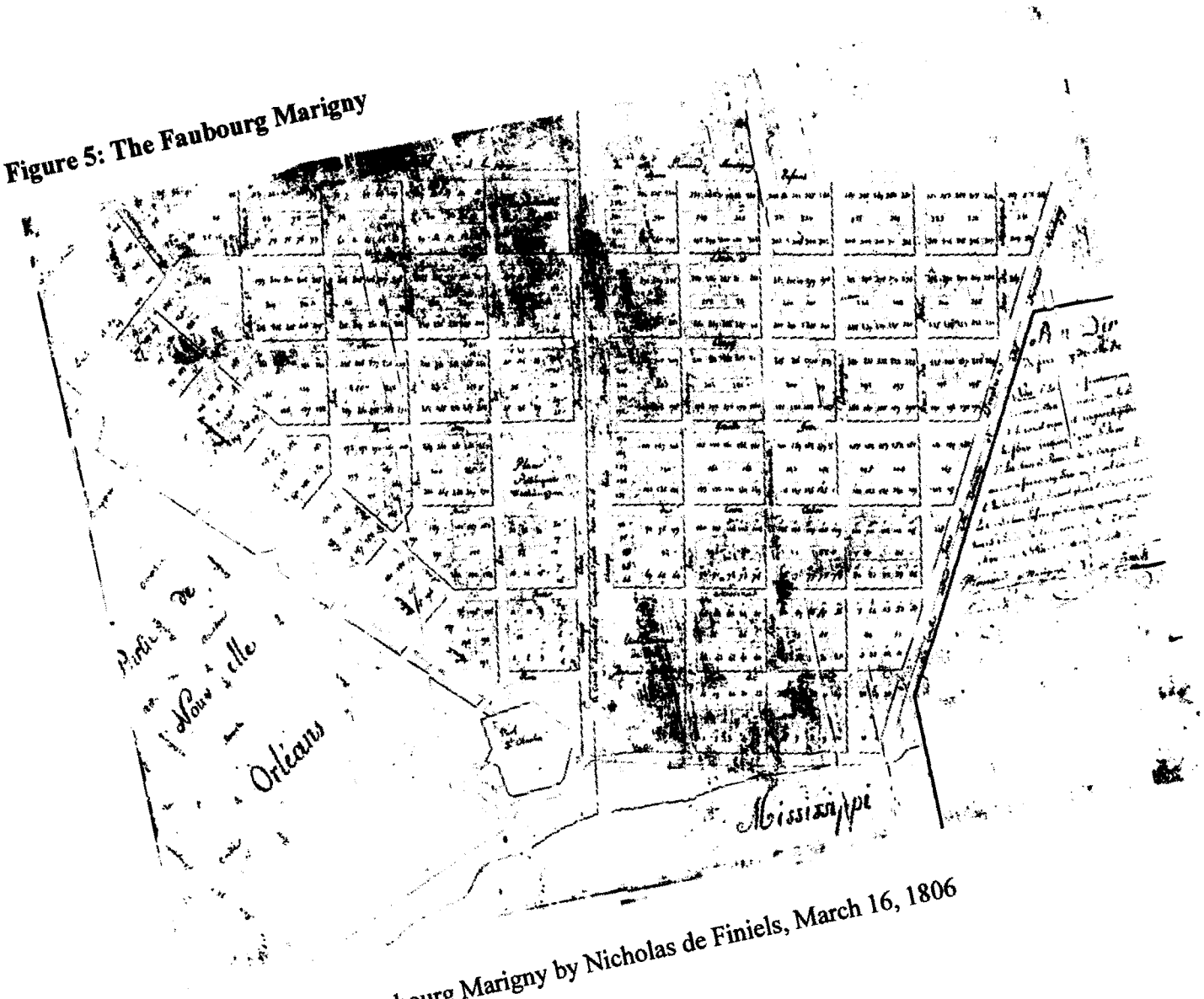
Figure 4: Marie Couvent's Properties



Red Star: Barracks Street Property Blue Star: Grand Hommes/Union Street Property

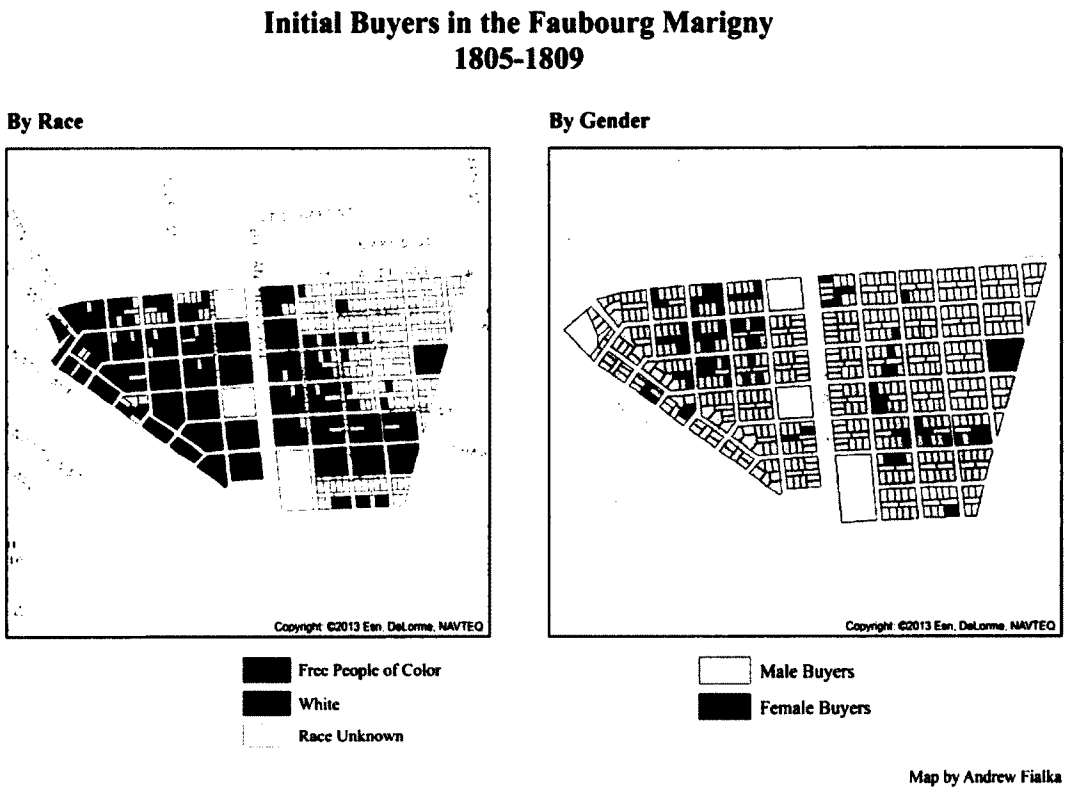
Map from Copy of Plan of New Orleans, June 20, 1812 by Jacques Tanesse
New Orleans Notarial Archives with modifications by the author

Figure 5: The Faubourg Marigny



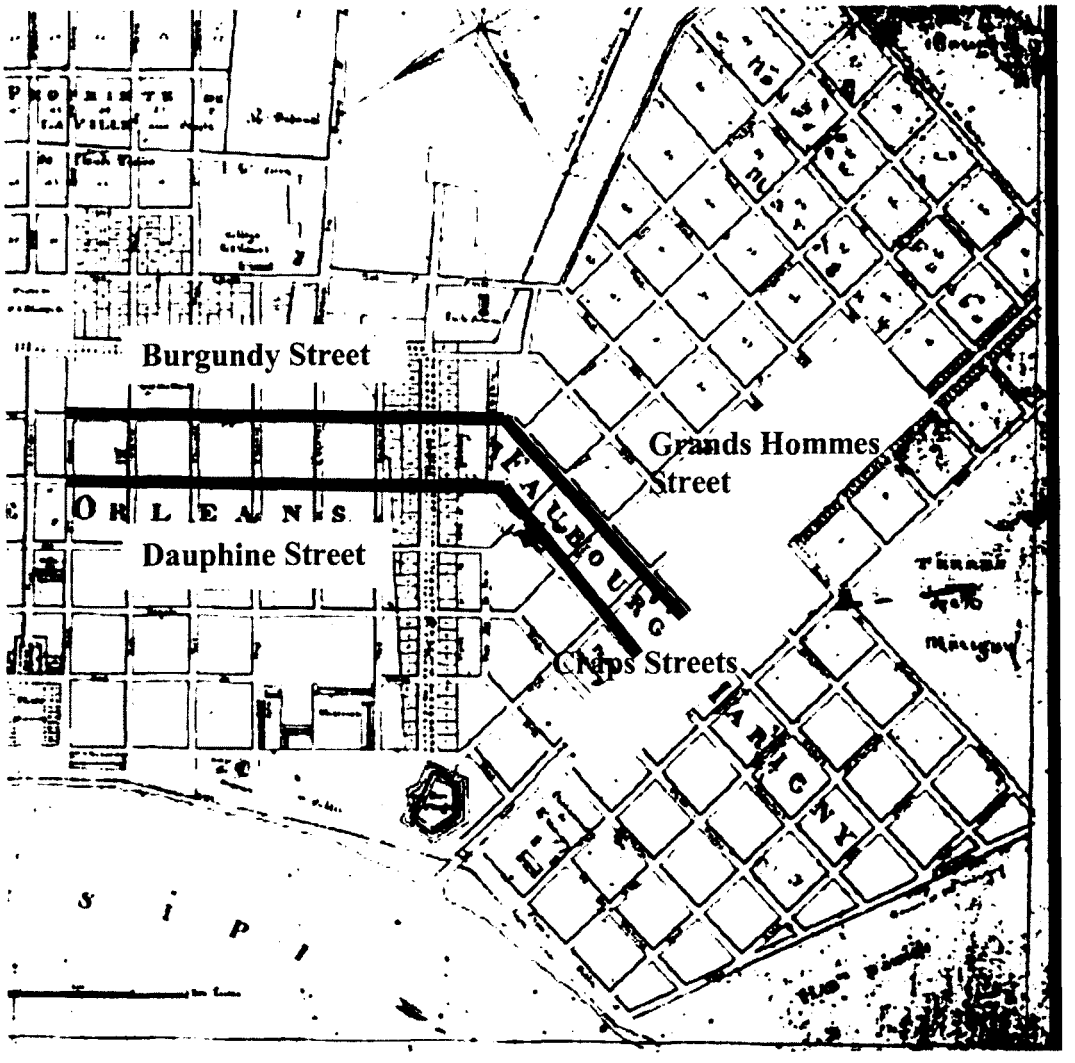
Copy of Plan of Faubourg Marigny by Nicholas de Finiels, March 16, 1806
New Orleans Notarial Archives

Figure 6: Free People of Color Original Buyers in the Faubourg Marigny



Map made by Andrew Fialka using GIS by the author

Figure 7: Free People of Color in the French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny



Map from Copy of Plan of New Orleans, June 20, 1812 by Jacques Tanesse
New Orleans Notarial Archives with modifications by the author

Figure 8: Marie Justine Sirnir Couvent's Tomb, St. Louis Cemetery No. 2

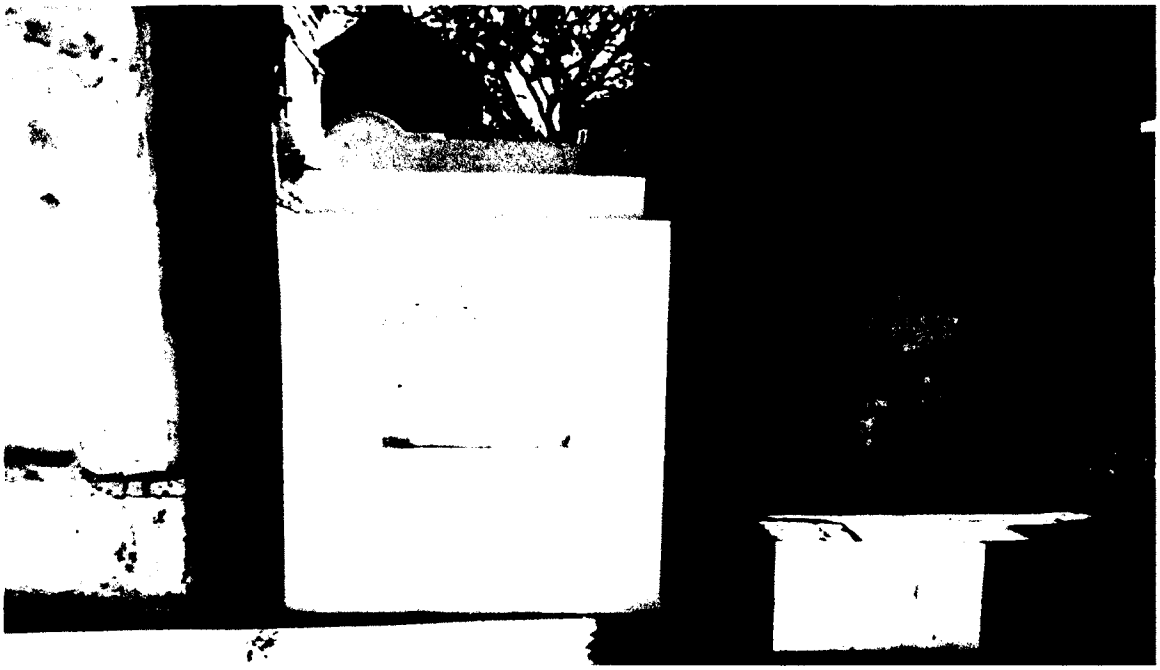


Photo by the author

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Acts of Octave de Armas
Acts of Stevan de Quinones
Acts of Amedee Ducatel
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